

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

"AGGIE":

THE BIOGRAPHY OF LOS ANGELES

NEWSPAPERWOMAN AGNESS UNDERWOOD

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in

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by

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ABSTRACT

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Agness Underwood's journalism career spanned more than four decades, from 1926 when she began working as a part-time switchboard operator for the Los Angeles Record until she retired in 1968 as assistant managing editor of the Los Angeles Herald Examiner.

For the majority of her career, she worked for Hearst newspapers in Los Angeles, establishing a reputation as a top crime and court reporter during the 1930s and 1940s, but it was her promotion to city editor of the Los Angeles Herald-Express in 1947 that made history. Rarely, if ever, had a woman broken the management barrier on a major metropolitan daily newspaper. She held the position for 17-1/2 years, more than four times longer than any of her male predecessors.

Although this thesis encompasses Underwood's entire life, it focuses on the relationship between the personality traits and motivational forces established during her formative years and her later accomplishments as an adult in a male-dominated profession.

Orphaned at age 5, Underwood lived with an Indiana foster family until age 15 when she left for California alone to begin a new life. The findings of this study reveal that the insecurity and low self-esteem Underwood felt as a child contributed to her drive to succeed as an adult. It is further concluded that her effectiveness as a journalist was based on a combination of innate personal qualities (intelligence, compassion and curiosity) and survival skills (skepticism, resourcefulness and perseverance) learned during the struggle to survive on her own at an early age.

This thesis also examines Underwood's image as an aggressive newspaperwoman in the "Front Page" tradition--an image that remained essentially the same throughout her career.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Los Angeles journalist Agness Underwood, who died on July 3, 1984, often is described as the first woman city editor of a major U.S. metropolitan daily newspaper.¹ Her career began in 1926, when as a young wife and mother she went to work at the Los Angeles Record to help temporarily with the support of her family.² She retired from newspaper work 42 years later as the assistant managing editor of the Los Angeles Herald Examiner. For the majority of her career, she worked for Hearst newspapers in Los Angeles, establishing a reputation as a crime and court reporter during the 1930s and 1940s. In 1947 she became city editor of the Los Angeles Herald-Express, a position she held four times longer than any of her male predecessors.³

This thesis is a biographical study of Agness Underwood particularly focusing on the elements of her early life that contributed to her success as a newspaperwoman. Particular attention is paid to environmental, economic and psychological factors during her formative years.

Research Questions

The following research questions form the organizational framework for this study:

- 1) In what ways did the struggle of her early years influence her behavior in later life? In what ways did it influence her success?
- 2) Which of Underwood's qualities were important to her acceptance in the city room?
- 3) What did Underwood have to do differently or more intensely than her male counterparts to succeed and survive?
- 4) Was Underwood accepted as an equal by her male colleagues? If so, what elements of her background and/or character were most likely responsible? If not, why was this the case?
- 5) What was her image in the media and how was it perpetuated? How did the public perception of her friends, family and co-workers? What part did her autobiography play in the public's perception of her? In what ways, if any, did her image change over the years?
- 6) In what ways, if any, did her self-image change over the span of her career?
- 7) What qualities contributed to her longevity as a city editor?
- 8) What lessons from Underwood's career and personal life are relevant to contemporary women journalists,

particularly those in management?

Hypotheses

This study explores the following hypotheses:

1) The insecurity and low self-esteem Underwood felt as a child made her try especially hard to succeed as an adult.

2) The acquisition of stereotypical male survival skills during her youth helped her as a reporter.

3) Underwood's approach to reporting helped gain acceptance among her male colleagues and competitors.

4) She had interpersonal skills--such as empathy--more associated with women than men which helped her both as a reporter and an editor.

5) Underwood worked in journalism at the right time. There was a good match between Underwood's values and priorities and the type of journalism that was then practiced by newspapers in Los Angeles.

6) Underwood's image changed over the span of her 42-year career to coincide with the changes occurring in journalism and society. As newspapers became less sensational, her public image became less flamboyant. As the concept of women in the workplace became more common, Underwood was portrayed less frequently as a women doing a man's job.

Methodology

This study uses the historical method to test the previously stated hypotheses. This is done by systematically gathering and reading extensive primary material on all aspects of Underwood's life, particularly those that relate to the focus of this thesis. Secondary material provides the necessary information to interpret and analyze the primary data qualitatively.

A majority of primary data comes from a collection of Underwood's personal letters, periodicals, photographs and memorabilia (dated 1920-1982). This material, described in detail in Chapter Three, is supplemented with additional printed material culled from local libraries, audio and video tapes and interviews with former colleagues, friends and relatives.

Secondary material comes from a thorough literature search conducted in several Los Angeles libraries. This process is described at length in Chapter Two.

Background

Although women in journalism were not commonplace during the first part of the century, neither were they a rarity. Underwood's publisher, William Randolph Hearst, was known for hiring women reporters.⁴ But being a newspaperwoman did not necessarily mean having equal access to the same news beats as newsmen.

Most newswomen were delegated to the society or arts

sections. A few like Underwood covered crime, government or sports events. However, management positions, with the occasional exception of a society or feature section editorship, were out of reach for women. According to a 1938 book which was based on extensive research of the job opportunities open to women journalists, women could aspire to jobs primarily in "soft news" areas. News editorships were not even mentioned as a remote possibility.

Recent research indicates that even today, more than forty years after Underwood broke the management barrier, women have not made giant strides toward obtaining management positions on major American newspapers. That is not to say that there are no women holding editorships, but the numbers are still relatively small when compared to men in the same positions.⁵

When Underwood got her first job on a newspaper as a switchboard operator, her dream was not of becoming a news editor. In fact she didn't have any ambition of becoming a reporter. She just wanted to have a job that would pay for the silk stockings her husband told her he couldn't afford to buy for her.⁶

But it didn't take long for her to become mesmerized by the fast pace and excitement of the newspaper business.

The excesses of the 1920s seemed to be magnified in Los Angeles--a city unsaddled with Eastern tradition and values. The newspapers reflected the city's young, undisciplined spirit. News of the day ran the gamut from

crime to city government to real estate booms to sensational murder trials. Stars of a rapidly emerging movie industry provided reporters with plenty of glamour and outrageous behavior.⁷ And flamboyant evangelists like Aimee Semple McPherson showed the press that even religion did not have to be dull.⁸

It wasn't long before Underwood decided that she wanted to be a reporter. But not just any kind of a reporter--a city-side reporter.⁹ It seemed an unlikely possibility. Most city-side reporters were men.

In 1929, as the country was thrown into the Great Depression, Underwood began to make inroads into the city room. Over the next few years she covered sports and hard news stories sporadically, doing the bulk of her work for the women's section.¹⁰ In 1934, she was offered a reporting position with the Los Angeles Herald-Express, Hearst's evening daily. She didn't actually accept the job until the following year when she said she finally felt ready to "work in the big leagues."¹¹

At this time Hearst owned two of the four Los Angeles dailies, the Herald-Express and the morning Examiner. During the 1930s, Underwood's former newspaper, The Record, folded, but another newspaper, The Daily News, arrived to take its place. Hearst's major competition in this period was the Los Angeles Times, owned by Harry Chandler.¹²

The Times began gaining a circulation edge over the previously more popular Hearst newspapers in Los Angeles

during the 1930s when Hearst increasingly used his publications to express his philosophies on communism and anti-vivisectionism.¹³ The image of the Herald-Express as a conduit for airing Hearst's political opinions and his penchant for sensationalism had not changed much by the time Underwood became city editor in 1947.

Could the seedy reputation of the Herald-Express have diminished the significance of Underwood's contribution to newspaper history in the eyes of journalism historians?

Importance of the Study

Although Underwood's life is chronicled in an autobiography and she has gotten a great deal of press coverage over the years, she has never received the kind of scholarly attention a newspaperwoman of her stature deserves.

Historically, she is important as an outstanding journalist, an extraordinary woman and a prominent figure in Los Angeles. Her accomplishments as a journalist ranged from breaking some of the city's most infamous murder stories to running a chaotic city desk for more than seventeen years. When she retired from the Herald Examiner in 1968, she held the position of assistant managing editor. During her city editorship, the circulation rose from 100,000 to 700,000--making her newspaper the largest afternoon daily in the country.¹⁴

Underwood's career spanned more than four decades--

from the Roaring Twenties to the turbulent Sixties. An in-depth study of her life should provide new insight and information about the history of the newspaper where she worked for 42 years. It will also mean discovering how the life and times of a city influences the journalist and how the journalist influences the city over a period of time.

When Underwood retired in 1968, an era ended for the Herald Examiner. A long, bitter strike was in progress that would eventually sink the newspaper to a position from which it would never fully recover. But Underwood left newspaper work with a bang--literally. She set off a fire cracker in the city room to signal the end of what was an exceptional career of a very unusual newspaperwoman.¹⁵ She was not only a woman who broke the management barrier, she also broke a lot of rules along the way.

Although Underwood's journalism career was filled with "firsts" and is interesting for its own sake, the significance of her life is not totally wedded to past accomplishments. Today, forty years after she became city editor, contemporary women journalists are still dealing with many of the same problems, biases and obstacles that existed in 1946.¹⁶ In this thesis an attempt has been made to look at the aspects of Underwood's professional and personal life that contributed to her success in order to provide some insight into the situation for contemporary women journalists.

Limitations of the Thesis

No attempt was made to provide a thorough analysis of Underwood's writing because of the biographical nature of this study, although selected writing samples were used to show the quality and style of her writing and to help provide some insight into her reporting skills.

Organization of the Thesis

This thesis consists of nine chapters plus a bibliography. Chapter Two contains a review of the secondary material and reference sources relevant to this study. Chapter Three describes the methodology of this thesis.

Next, four chapters explore Underwood's life and career. Organized chronologically, Chapter Four describes Underwood's background and deals with her early years, until she joined the Los Angeles Record, from 1926, when she began working on the switchboard, through her maturation as a reporter, until she left in 1935 to work for the Los Angeles Herald-Express.

Chapter Six covers her years as a Herald-Express reporter, where she furthered her reputation as one of the city's most respected general assignment reporters, through her promotion to city editor in 1947. Emphasis is placed on personal qualities, professional skills and environmental circumstances that formed the basis for her reputation.

Chapter Seven deals with her editorship, which lasted from 1947 through 1968, when she retired as assistant managing editor of the Herald Examiner. It deals with factors that led to her promotion and explores the attitudes of her colleagues and the press at the time of her promotion. It also focuses on personal and professional qualities that contributed to her survival and unprecedented number of years in that position.

Chapter Eight deals with Underwood's image. It focuses on her autobiography, published in 1949, and its impact on her image, her career and her place in journalism history. Chapter Nine provides an analysis of the data and the conclusions drawn from it. An appendix lists awards and honors Underwood received for her work as a journalist.

CHAPTER I NOTES

¹Although Underwood herself never made this claim almost every article written about Underwood makes it. See for example: Stan Leppard, "Aggie's Torrid Era at Helm of Paper Bared," Long Beach Independent Press-Telegram, 24 August 1980, Lifestyle section, p. 1.

²Agness Underwood, Newspaperwoman (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1984), p. 15.

³Leppard, p. 1.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Iona Robertson Logie, Careers For Women in Journalism (Scranton, PA: International Textbook Co., 1938), pp. 33-35.

⁶Dorothy Journey, "More Women Newsroom Managers--But Nowhere Near Enough," ASNE Bulletin, December/January 1984, pp. 3-5.

⁷Underwood, p. 15.

⁸Remi Nadeau, Los Angeles: From Mission to Modern City (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1960), pp. 151, 214, 258.

⁹John Caughey and LaRee Caughey, Los Angeles: Biography of a City (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 250.

¹⁰Underwood, p. 41.

¹¹Ibid., p. 45.

¹²Ibid., pp. 72-73.

¹³Edwin Emery and Michael Emery, The Press and America, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1978), p. 435.

¹⁴Robert Gottlieb and Irene Wolt, Thinking Big: The Story of the Los Angeles Times, Its Publishers and Their Influences on Southern California (New York: Putnam, 1977), p. 235.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

An attempt was made in this literature search to review a broad spectrum of popular and scholarly resource material that would enable me to write a biography of Agness Underwood that would go beyond a mere factual treatment of her life.

It was important to find information that would help me to understand how Underwood was able to reach a level of achievement and acceptance that was rare for newspaperwomen of her day. It was equally necessary to find material that would give me some perspective on the contribution Underwood has made to journalism history.

The literature for this chapter is divided into the following topic areas, each relating to a different aspect of the research considered valuable for a thorough analysis of this subject: 1) Secondary Sources about Agness Underwood, 2) Women as Journalists, 3) Men as Journalists, 4) General Journalism History, 5) William Randolph Hearst, 6) Los Angeles History, 7) Los Angeles Journalism History,

and 8) Methodology Sources.

An evaluation of the indexes, abstracts, bibliographies and other reference sources used to locate material in the above topic area precedes a discuss of the literature.

No particular type of source was the most valuable. Interesting information came from both old and new books, periodicals and scholarly journals of every type and description. However, a collection of papers, personal correspondence, memorabilia and photographs donated by Agness Underwood to the Journalism Department of California State University at Northridge and currently housed in the University's Urban Archives is significant because it contains primary materials that likely would otherwise be unavailable.

One problem discovered during the search was the lack of substantial secondary information available about Underwood. To compensate for this, extra effort was put into reading biographies about Underwood's contemporaries in an attempt to gain insight into the obstacles, rewards and daily lives of reporters of the day.

Libraries

The bulk of research was done at the Oviatt Library, California State University, Northridge, and the Research Library at U.C.L.A. Both libraries contain excellent collections of books on journalism, women and Los Angeles

history. Other libraries containing good references on Los Angeles history, in particular, used for this study were the main branch Los Angeles Public Library, the Glendale Public Library and the Burbank Public Library.

Indexes

A search through Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, 1930 through 1986, turned up only one listing under the name Agness Underwood. These years were chosen for the search because they cover the years when she began gaining recognition as a newspaperwoman through the present time when retrospective pieces on her life were likely to be written. The index was also searched, 1920 through 1966, the period shortly before and during Underwood's career, under the following headings: newspapers, reporters and reporting, journalism, journalists, Los Angeles (sub-headings: newspapers, history, and crime), press, women as reporters, editors and editing, Hearst and Hearst Corporation. For the size and scope of this large index, the search proved frustrating. Material known to exist in magazines covered by the index was not listed, making it easy to wonder what else might be missing.

Although the Magazine Index only lists articles back to 1976, it seems to be a thorough index of recently published writings in popular periodicals. The microform reader makes it easy to search quickly under many topic headings. The following headings were searched, 1976

through 1986: reporters and reporting (sub-headings: biography, employment, personal narrations, anecdotes, attitudes), newspaper publishing (sub-headings: California, management), newspapers, American newspapers, journalism, journalists, press, women (sub-headings: biography, employment, Hearst Corporation, Hearst) and Los Angeles (sub-headings: books, newspapers). Listings leading to background information on women journalists and journalism history were the most useful.

Nothing useful was found in Topicator, an index specializing in communications and journalism publications. The index was searched 1973 through 1986, from the publication's inception through current volumes, to find articles written in the past decade under the following subject headings: book reviews, journalism; education, journalism; news reporting; personalities; news reporters; print; and talent, female.

A few listings leading to background information on Los Angeles and journalism history were found by searching International Index to Periodicals, years 1920 through 1965, the years shortly before Underwood's journalism career through the time this index stopped publication. Social Science Index were searched from their inception in 1974 through 1986 but little useful information was found. Subject headings searched in all of the above indexes included: Underwood's name, women as journalists, journalism history, Hearst, newspapers, reporters and

reporting and Los Angeles.

The Los Angeles Times Index useful for locating a few interesting pieces on women journalists. The index was searched from 1973 through 1986 under the headings Underwood, Hearst, Los Angeles (sub-headings: newspapers, history), and women.

The New York Times was searched from 1920, a few years before Underwood began her career, through 1986, under the headings Agness Underwood and Los Angeles (sub-headings, crime, newspapers, history). This index was particularly useful for locating major news stories pertaining to this study that were written prior to the publication of the Los Angeles Times Index 1973. An approximate date could then be determined and the story could be traced by going through the Los Angeles Times or Hearst's Los Angeles newspapers issue by issue.

The Alternative Press Index was used because it indexes several feminist publications that seemed to be promising sources for articles on sex discrimination in the newsroom. Unfortunately the search turned up little of interest and the small print made the task difficult. The index was searched from its inception in 1970 through 1986 to locate currently written material under the subject headings newspaper reporters, journalists, journalism, women writers, women professionals and women media workers.

Public Affairs Information Service Index (PAIS) was searched from 1920 through 1986, for scholarly articles

under the headings women in media, journalists, newspapers, reporters and reporting and Los Angeles (sub-headings: history). This index, which includes government publications, yielded little of interest.

A few scholarly articles on journalism history and methodology were found by searching the Journalism Quarterly Index, 1920 through 1986, under the headings newspapers, women and media and book reviews.

The Biography Index was searched, 1949 through 1951 under Underwood's name. Her autobiography was not listed. This index was also searched from 1948 through 1960 to find biographies about other journalists of Underwood's day. It produced a few useful leads.

Abstracts

The value of the abstracting services, in general, is that once an interesting-sounding title is found, the summary makes it easier to decide whether the source is worth looking for. The following abstracts were the most useful for this study in terms of subject matter covered.

A search through Journalism Abstracts, a publication that summarizes the master's theses and doctoral dissertations of the major journalism schools in this country, was useful in locating a few studies done on reporters and reporting. The abstracts were searched from 1963 through 1986, biography, research methods, and miscellaneous.

Each issue of Journalism Quarterly summarizes and evaluates scholarly articles in several other publications besides its own. In order to locate research studies and articles done in the last decade relevant to this thesis, a search was conducted for years 1973 through 1986. A few useful articles were found by searching under the headings education for journalism, history and biography, women and media, and research methods.

Communication Abstracts, published four times a year, abstracts communication-related journals, books and reports from research institutions. The years 1978, when the publication began, through 1986 were searched in order to find recently published articles that pertained to this study. Headings searched were: bibliography, crime news, crime coverage, editors, gender, sex-roles, journalism history, newspaper history, Los Angeles Times, media, news editing, news reporting, newspaper editors, newspaper editing, newspaper management, newspapers newspaper research, press, press history, research methodology, reporters, reporting, research methods, sexism, women, women and media, and women journalists. This publication did provide abstracts for some useful scholarly studies, but nowhere near the number one might expect to find in a source with all of the above topic headings.

America: History and Life contains abstracts and bibliographical citations of articles on the history and culture of the United States. This publication was useful

in locating background articles on Los Angeles history. It was searched 1964 through 1986, (the beginning of publication through the most up-to-date volumes), under the following headings: United States: 1917-1945; 1945-present (sub-headings): politics and government, economic affairs, society and culture.) Other sub-headings searched were: Far West, California; California history, humanities and social sciences. An index under a separate cover contains listings for material covered in the abstracts.

Women Studies Abstracts, published quarterly, is a comprehensive source for abstracts of books, journal and research articles pertaining to women. This publication was searched from 1972 through 1986 (from the beginning of publication to the most recent volumes), under the headings: history and art, literature, media and media reviews, on the nature of prejudice and sex discrimination, biography, criticism and book reviews. This source provided some leads to background studies on women as journalists and on sexual bias.

The Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) was used to obtain listings for unpublished academic papers that would pertain to this study. The index from 1966 through 1986, (from the inception of the index to the present), was searched under the headings journalism, news media, news reporting, newspapers, research, research methodology and women's studies. The search produced a few useful leads to material not discovered elsewhere.

Book Review Digest was searched from 1949 through 1951 to see whether Newspaperwoman was included. It wasn't.

Tables of Contents, Book Review Sections

In order not to overlook major articles of importance that might not have been included in the indexes of abstracts I searched, tables of contents in the following publications were searched for titles that appeared appropriate for the study; Journalism Quarterly, 1930 through 1986, Columbia Journalism Review, 1966 through 1986, and Journalism History, 1974 through 1986. This search turned up a few articles that fell through the cracks during other searches.

The 1983-86 book review sections of Journalism Quarterly and Columbia Journalism Review were consulted in an attempt to uncover books that might be too recent to have shown up in other indexes or abstracts. They provided a few leads to articles of interest to this study.

Secondary Sources About Agness Underwood

Although quite a bit of primary literature about Agness Underwood exists, secondary material is scarce. Consequently the book reviews that appeared in various periodicals and newspapers across the country following the publication of her autobiography in 1949 are significant sources of secondary information for this study.

Because the reviewers almost never critiqued the book without also judging the woman who wrote it, the reviews often were like miniature biographies. Their importance increased because they reflect the way Underwood's image, as presented in Newspaperwoman,¹ was perceived by the press and, in turn, by the public.

The following is a sampling of reviews chosen for one of several reasons: 1) the high credibility of the author or the publication; 2) the review expressed a regional attitude; 3) the review contained a particularly insightful or unusual point of view; or 4) the review contained information about sales potential of the book. In selecting these pieces, the reviewer's evaluation of Underwood's writing ability was of secondary importance to his/her judgement of her life.

A review by newspaperwoman Bess Furman² is significant to this thesis because she was a contemporary of Underwood's who also wrote her own autobiography (a short time before the publication of Newspaperwoman). Because of her own background, her comments about Underwood's qualifications and skills as a newswoman are worth noting.

Read in conjunction with Furman's review, "L.A. Newsgirl's Autobiography Confesses All," in the Dallas Times Herald³ is useful because it compares Underwood's book to Bess Furman's autobiography. This review not only sheds some light on the way Underwood was seen, but it

makes Furman's review a little more meaningful.

A newspaper review by Nancy Barr Mavity⁴ is valuable not just because the author was a newspaperwoman and well-known author of books about journalism; it is also significant because Mavity discusses how Underwood broke the management barrier. To a lesser degree this review is also useful as a thoughtful critique of Newspaperwoman's uneven literary qualities.

Gladwyn Hill's lively review in the New York Times⁵ is useful to this study as an example of what was written in a respected Eastern newspaper about the book. Of particular interest is Hill's description of Underwood as a Ben Hecht-type reporter, thus enhancing that particular kind of gutsy image associated with male reporters of the 1920s and 1930s.

A review by Gene Fowler⁶ is useful because of Fowler's own background as a reporter during the early part of the century. But the most interesting thing about his rave review of Underwood's book is the fact that it was the one Underwood's newspaper, the Herald-Express, chose to run.

A few reviews are significant to this study because they make a point of discussing Underwood's aversion to feminist thinking. One by a woman in the Worcester Telegram⁷ and another by a man in the Dallas News⁸ show how at least one man and one woman viewed the reasons for her anti-feminist attitude.

A review in American Policeman⁹ is useful to this study as an example of how much the law enforcement community respected Underwood as a person and as a reporter covering police business.

Two other trade publications, Retail Bookseller and Publisher's Weekly,¹¹ ran short items that are somewhat useful to this study because they discuss the potential sales and popularity of the book.

Finally, a review in the Boston Post¹² is significant because Newspaperwoman triggered such a scathing assessment of Underwood from this particular reporter. This review, coupled with the raves the book received, shows the wide spectrum of opinion that Underwood's autobiography generated--a possible microcosm of how a person with her image was viewed by the general public.

Two articles written in the early 1980s, "Aggie's Torrid Era At Helm of Paper Bared," by Stan Leppard¹³ and "Newspaper Woman Tells All About It," by Bruce Henstell,¹⁴ provide an excellent overview of Underwood's life. Both articles also contain useful background information on Los Angeles journalism.

Women as Journalists

In order to assess Underwood's place in journalism history and fully understand her experience as a woman journalist during a period of time when women in the city room were still an oddity, it is necessary to be familiar

with a variety of sources dealing with both newspaperwomen and bias in the newsroom. For this study it is relevant to use biographies and other source material written about the experiences of women in journalism, especially Underwood's contemporaries. It is equally important to review studies that have been done on women in management, on sexual discrimination directed at women reporters and on job opportunities available for women in journalism during the first part of the century.

The following group of sources provides a broad variety of references dealing with women as journalists. By taking pieces of information from all of them, it is a little easier to gain the insight needed to write about Underwood.

Ladies of the Press,¹⁵ a wonderful 600-page history of early women journalists written by Isabel Ross, a journalist herself, was published before Underwood had a chance to make her mark, so there was no mention of her in the book. However, the biographical stories of the numerous pioneering newspaperwomen make Ross's book valuable as a resource on women in journalism. The chapters dealing with Hearst's women reporters are particularly interesting because Underwood seems to have so little in common with any of them.

Marion Marzolf's Up From the Footnote¹⁶ is another excellent resource on the history of women in journalism. Written in 1977, it covers a broad chronological spectrum

of newspaperwomen from colonial times to present, including Agness Underwood. Unlike Ross's book, Marzolf includes a complete index and good chapter notes to make further research easier.

She Was There,¹⁷ a book by Jean Collins, is a collection of oral histories of early women journalists. Although there is nothing in this highly-readable book that pertains directly to Underwood, the biographies of newspaperwomen who blazed the trail are interesting for this study because they are about other women who had to overcome some of the same kinds of obstacles that Underwood faced.

Another well-known newspaperwoman of Underwood's era, Bess Furman wrote an autobiography, Washington-Byline,¹⁸ which was published in the same year as Newspaperwoman, and covers roughly the same period of time as Underwood's autobiography. That is where the similarity ends for the most part. The careers and the writing styles of these two newspaperwomen are very different, making a comparison of the two books quite useful for this study.

Headline Happy,¹⁹ Florabelle Muir's memoirs, contains a wealth of wonderful anecdotes about reporters and reporting, including some about Agness Underwood, during the 1930s and 1940s. Of particular value to this study is Muir's analysis of the way she was able to get and keep a job that was usually reserved for men--covering murders and other "unladylike" beats.

Adela Rogers St. Johns' autobiography, The Honeycomb,²⁰ is useful for this study because it follows the life of another female Los Angeles reporter who worked for Hearst during many of the same years Underwood was a Hearst reporter. St. Johns, like Underwood, worked on the Herald Express, but their careers ultimately are quite different. The value of this book lies in the author's views of Hearst and her impressions of Los Angeles and Los Angeles journalism at the time when both she and Underwood were covering the city.

A master's thesis done at California State University, Northridge was useful to this study. Palmina Stephens' thesis on Adela Rogers St. Johns²¹ serves as a source of information about the newswoman whose career had several parallels to that of Underwood. To a lesser degree, Stephens' thesis is useful as a model for this study. The chapter notes and bibliography are extremely valuable for tracking down useful reference sources.

Nancy Barr Mavity's The Modern Newspaper,²² written in 1930, is really a journalism course in book form. But the chapter on reporters is interesting for this study because Mavity defines the traits and attitudes that characterize a successful reporter. Even more importantly, she discusses the role of the woman reporter and the ways she can overcome sexual bias in the newsroom.

Marie Manning, who wrote a column under the name Beatrice Fairfax, describes her experiences as a

newspaperwoman in Ladies Now and Then.²³ Written in 1944, the final chapters offer some insight into the kind of progress women were able to make during the first few decades of the century, making this interesting as background information.

Another autobiography that is a very good account of a newspaperwoman's experiences during the early part of the century is Flowing Stream²⁴ by Florence Finch Kelly. Although Kelly's career does not mirror Underwood's, her well-written book sheds some light on the obstacles facing many women journalists of that time period.

Although Dorothy Thompson's career was very different from Underwood's, Dorothy Thompson: A Legend in Her Time²⁵ is interesting to this study as the biography of another newspaperwoman whose career began during the first part of the century.

The life of the controversial journalist Eleanor M. "Cissy" Patterson is interesting to this study because of Patterson's close ties with William Randolph Hearst and her career in newspaper management. Two books chronicle her life and career. A 1966 biography by her grandniece Alice Albright Hoge²⁶ gives an affectionate yet fascinating overview of her entire life. A more recent biography written by Ralph G. Martin²⁷ focuses on the excesses in her life and the power she attained in her career. Both books provide this study with some useful insight into the struggle of a woman journalist working in a man's world.

Although it does not include any mention of Underwood, Great Women of the Press²⁸ provides a nice historical overview of women journalists, ranging from colonial printers through war correspondents. Each of the 18 chapters focuses on an individual newspaperwoman who worked in one of a broad variety of jobs in journalism. For this study it is interesting to note that a city editor is not included. The bibliography in the back of the book provides an excellent list of books and periodicals about the women included in the book.

Star Reporters and 24 of Their Stories²⁹ is included in this section, even though the majority of stories are by men, because the chapter written by newspaperwoman Winnifred Black discusses the long history of sexual discrimination in the newsroom. Many of the remaining sections of the book by male reporters are also useful because the stories are by or about Underwood's contemporaries.

An excellent resource for this study is Careers For Women in Journalism³⁰ written in the 1930s for young women who were aspiring journalists. A scholarly study written by a high school English teacher, the book gives statistics on job opportunities and many other aspects of journalism as a career for women. Possibly the best part of the book is the section of anonymous interviews which reveal truthful personal histories. Of particular interest is the discussion of salaries, obstacles of being a parent and a

career woman and the lack of options open to women in hard news fields.

Of lesser significance, but still useful to this study, is another book written in the 1930s, Careers For Women.³¹ This is a compilation of 43 chapters, each written by a different career woman of the 1930s. The chapter on journalism, written by reporter Emma Bugbe, is interesting because it discusses what expectations a woman of that time period might realistically assume. There is also a section discussing typical salaries of women journalists compared to salaries of other women careerists, and a few paragraphs of advice on what personal traits are appreciated in the newsroom by male editors.

Women in Journalism,³² written in 1926, is useful because it describes the types of journalism careers a young girl of that time period might aspire to. The descriptions clearly show the lack of hard news jobs open to women, while the only kind of editorships mentioned are those on the society pages.

An article written by newspaperwoman Catharine Brody in 1926 for a popular periodical of the day, American Mercury,³³ discusses sexual discrimination in the newsroom. Although this is not a scholarly study, Brody's observations reveal prevalent attitudes toward women during the time Underwood was entering the newspaper profession. Her comments regarding Hearst's employment practices and feelings toward women reporters are particularly

significant in assessing how far removed Underwood was from fitting into the mold of the typical Hearst girl reporter.

"Paper Dolls,"³⁴ a magazine article written twenty years after the American Mercury piece, is useful to this study because it describes the then-still prevalent sexual bias in the newsroom.

Several recent books and articles (in both scholarly and popular publications) provide information on the current situation for women in newspaper management and women reporters working hard news beats. Examined as a group, the following sources give a good overview of the job opportunity picture, areas of sexual discrimination and satisfaction level for contemporary women journalists, particularly those in management.

Managerial Women by Margaret Hennig and Anne Jardin³⁵ is valuable for background information on how the woman in management survives. Based on Hennig's doctoral dissertation, the book examines both males and females in managerial capacities. It looks at their attitudes, behavior and achievement potential. Although this is a recent book, some of the same findings may well be applicable to Underwood's situation thirty years earlier.

Women: A Feminist Perspective³⁶ is a compilation of scholarly works by feminist authors. It contains many useful facts and concepts about women in the work force and sexual discrimination. For this study, the chapter entitled "Women in the Informal Organization of Work" is of

special value because it discusses the reluctance of men to let women into their "club"--a major focus of this thesis. The notes at the ends of chapters led to further research sources.

Three unpublished research papers by Ardyth Sohn³⁷ and one by Charlene J. Brown, Chris Ogan and David H. Weaver³⁸ describe the current situation of women in newspaper management. These scholarly studies are useful for this thesis because, even though the data is on current newspaper editors, many of the findings may be applicable to Underwood.

The situation for contemporary women editors is also the subject of articles in the popular publication Savvy.³⁹ Again much of the information, although current, may be useful in understanding some of the obstacles faced by Underwood many years ago.

A recent article by Dorothy Jurney⁴⁰ was valuable because it provides statistical information on how slow the progress has been for women journalists attempting to break into management. This kind of material is useful in analyzing what kinds of lessons Underwood's career has for contemporary women journalists, particularly those in management.

An article by Terri Schultz-Brooks in Columbia Journalism Review⁴¹ looks at the progress being made by women in the newsroom. For this study it's interesting to note how women are making inroads into hard news areas and

how their careers differ from Underwood's.

Recent articles by Grace Barrett,⁴² Ardyth B. Sohn⁴³ and Christine Ogan⁴⁴ which look at the character traits and attitudes of contemporary women editors are useful for this study in determining whether the same that made Underwood successful are still relevant today.

A 1987 article by Thomas B. Rosenstiel⁴⁵ profiles Janet Chusmir, the first woman to become the executive editor of a major metropolitan daily newspaper. It is valuable to this thesis not only because it reveals parallels between the careers of Chusmir and Underwood, but also because it shows the way each of their breakthroughs into the traditionally male area of newspaper management was treated by the media. The article also provides some excellent data on the current employment situation for women in newspaper management.

Men as Journalists

The subject of male journalists is important to this study because the course of Underwood's career more closely resembled newsmen rather than newswomen of her day.

Biographies of male reporters and editors who were contemporaries of Underwood were utilized to gain some insight into the ways their lives paralleled and diverged from hers. They also were used to more fully understand her.

For the Life of Me is an autobiography by James

Richardson⁴⁶ who was the city editor on Hearst's Los Angeles Examiner while Underwood held the same position on the Herald Express. There are many similarities in their careers, (for example, both were reporters on the Herald working the police and court beats at one time), and their respective autobiographies are filled with the same kinds of colorful anecdotes. In some cases, the same stories are told, but the details are a world apart.

City Editor: Memoirs of a City Editor,⁴⁷ an autobiography by Stanley Walker, is valuable to this study for two major reasons. Walker, a well-known editor of a major metropolitan daily during the 1920s and 1930s, reflects on the varied aspects of his job, giving a very vivid picture of a city editorship from first-hand experience. Even more useful to this study is the chapter devoted to Walker's diatribe on women in the newsroom. It's a classic example of male sexual bias during the early part of the century. Another interesting sidelight is Walker's observation (in the Foreward) about the character traits of successful editors.

Although it's a fictional work, Front Page,⁴⁸ a play by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, exemplifies the rowdiness, humor and chaotic atmosphere familiar to the newsroom where Underwood worked. And, because the play was so popular, the journalists of Front Page represent a stereotyped image of the reporters of Underwood's day. For this reason alone, the play has value in any analysis of a

city-side reporter of the 1920s and 1930s.

The material discussed in the master's thesis, "Image of Reporters in 1920s Fiction About Reporters,"⁴⁹ refers primarily to male journalists. Just that fact makes this study interesting in terms of noting the lack of female role models for newspaperwomen in the fiction of that period. Many of the study's findings describing stereotypical behavior attributed to reporters of that era are useful for this thesis in understanding Underwood. But the study would have been more valuable had it better related the image of 1920s fictional reporters to their real live counterparts.

Newsman Bill Doherty's autobiography, Crime Reporter,⁵⁰ is interesting to this study because his career as a court and police reporter began at roughly the same time as Underwood's. Although he remained a reporter throughout his career in Chicago and she became an editor in Los Angeles, there are many parallels that are worth noting.

Gene Fowler reminisces about his days as a reporter during the 1920s in Skyline.⁵¹ Although his experiences are based in New York, Fowler (like Underwood) was a Hearst reporter. And his well-written book describes the kind of city-side atmosphere that no doubt helped form the young Underwood's ideas about newspaper work and the life it represented.

It would be easy to dismiss Walter Winchell's

autobiography, Winchell Exclusive,⁵² as one long Winchell gossip column. But it does contain some interesting anecdotes involving Hearst and Hearst reporters who were contemporaries of Underwood, while it includes one story about Underwood. This book also gives a picture of the type of newsman prevalent during Underwood's era and almost nonexistent today.

A strange little volume by Chester Lord,⁵³ written in 1922, describes the job opportunities available for the male student who is interested in becoming a journalist. Unlike the advice given to females (in other sources written during the same time period), Chester never mentions society pages or even feature writing. He talks about the job prospects in hard news and editing. This is important to this study because it demonstrates the different kinds of expectations that were provided for young people of each sex--making a city-editorship something a young girl might never think possible for her to attain.

General Journalism History

In order to understand Agness Underwood's place in journalism history, it is necessary to have a general knowledge about the growth of journalism in the United States. The following sources provided the background information necessary to more fully understand the nature and uniqueness of Underwood's accomplishments and provide

guidance in relating her career to those who came before and after.

The Press and America⁵⁴ by Edwin Emery and Michael Emery is an excellent resource for tracing the roots of American journalism and understanding its growth. Although no reference is made to Underwood, Hearst and Hearst publications are discussed at length. Each chapter contains notes and bibliographic information that facilitates further research.

Frank Luther Mott's American Journalism: A History, 1690-1960⁵⁵ also provides good general information on newspaper history. Organized chronologically, it's an easy-to-use reference source that includes plenty of notes and bibliographic information for further study.

William Randolph Hearst

Background information specifically about William Randolph Hearst and the Hearst Corporation is useful to this thesis in light of the number of years Underwood spent as a Hearst employee. It is important to understand the nature of Hearst's attitudes toward journalism, his hiring practices regarding women and how the quality of his newspapers was perceived. The following sources provide an overview of Hearst, his newspapers and the controversies surrounding his life. Together they contain the variety of viewpoints necessary to understand how this powerful man affected Underwood's career and how her talents contributed

to the success of his newspaper.

Citizen Hearst: A Biography of William Randolph Hearst⁵⁶ and the Life and Times of William Randolph Hearst⁵⁷ are both useful for biographical information about Hearst and his publishing empire, including his hiring practices involving women.

William Randolph Hearst: A Portrait in His Own Words⁵⁸ is interesting to this study as a self-portrait of Hearst compiled by an insider--a close professional associate who was his supervising editor for many years. The editor, William D. Coblenz, had access to Hearst's personal papers, documents and correspondence. The book was compiled from this material a year after Hearst's death with no attempt to evaluate the data. For this study, the attitudes expressed by Hearst toward his publications and his employees are the most valuable information contained here.

The early publication date (1930) of John K. Winkler's W.R. Hearst: An American Phenomenon⁵⁹ makes it interesting as a look at Hearst at the peak of his career. For this study it also provides some insight into the image Hearst had at the time Underwood began her newspaper career.

Imperial Hearst⁶⁰ written in 1936, explores the financial and social ramifications of Hearst's career during that time period. Because the book is somewhat scholarly in approach, it provides some interesting

background information on Hearst's attitudes towards those who worked for him.

Los Angeles Journalism History

Underwood was a Los Angeles newspaperwoman throughout her entire career. The greatest part of that career was spent working on Hearst newspapers. The following section reviews books with background information on Los Angeles journalism in general, and the Hearst newspapers specifically. This section also includes sources on Los Angeles crime, since police and court reporting played such a large role in Underwood's life.

The Hearst Family and Empire, The Later Years, by Lindsay Chaney and Michael Cieply, contains useful information about the history of the Hearst newspapers in Los Angeles. The sections dealing specifically with the Herald-Express, the Examiner/Herald-Express merger and the 1967 strike at the Herald Examiner are particularly valuable to this study.

Thinking Big, The Story of the Los Angeles Times, Its Publishers and Their Influence on Southern California,⁶¹ a highly readable book by Robert Gottlieb and Irene Wolt, is one of the best sources for tracing the growth of the newspaper business in Los Angeles. Although the main focus of the book is the Los Angeles Times and the Chandler family, there are many references to the Hearst newspapers and even to the Los Angeles Record, where Underwood began

her career. The book provides an excellent overview of Los Angeles history and its relationship with the city's newspapers.

Although a more recent history of the Los Angeles Times by journalist Marshall Berges⁶² is not nearly as comprehensive as the Gottlieb and Wolt book, the first few chapters offer some interesting historical information for this study on Hearst's Los Angeles newspapers during the 1930s and 1940s. It also provides another viewpoint on the growth of Los Angeles and its journalism.

"The Information Empire" by Jack Hart⁶³ is also interesting to this thesis as a scholarly study done on the history of the Los Angeles Times. Again, it is nowhere near as comprehensive as the Gottlieb and Wolt book, but it does provide a view of the Times from another perspective.

Jack Lyle's News in Megalopolis⁶⁴ is an excellent source on the press in Los Angeles. For this study it is valuable particularly because it includes information on the Herald Examiner.

A lively 1948 three-column piece in Newsweek,⁶⁵ is interesting for this study because it examines the competition between a new Chandler newspaper and Underwood's Herald Express at the time she had recently been appointed city editor.

A 1953 Newsweek article⁶⁶ focuses on another Los Angeles newspaper, the Daily News, and sheds a little light on the state of journalism in the city at that time.

A 1962 article in Newsweek⁶⁷ describes the business deal that left Chandler with no competition from other Los Angeles newspapers in the morning and Hearst with no competition in the afternoon. For the purposes of this study, the article contains implications for Underwood's career. It also provides background information about the newspaper Underwood worked on in a managerial capacity.

Underwood gained recognition as an ace crime reporter. Consequently it is necessary to look at sources examining crime and criminals in the city she covered.

Los Angeles Murders, edited by Craig Rice,⁶⁸ discusses famous local murders of the 1920s and 1930s and provides another viewpoint of some of the cases Underwood mentions in her autobiography. The accounts by several different authors show what kinds of stories crime reporters like Underwood dealt with, as well as give a picture of the grislier side of sunny California--the one Underwood came to know well.

Although Underwood's name is never mentioned in Mickey Cohen: In My Own Words,⁶⁹ the book is interesting as a portrait of a self-described gangster who figured prominently in Underwood's life. The sections that deal with the way Los Angeles Hearst newspapers allegedly were told to deal with treatment of Cohen are of interest. The implication is that Underwood, as city editor, would deal with information about Cohen in a special way.

An article about Cohen in the Saturday Evening

Post,⁷⁰ which includes an anecdote about Underwood, is interesting to this study for the few paragraphs that give a little more insight into the relationship Underwood had with Cohen.

Los Angeles History

Because Agness Underwood spent all of her professional life in Los Angeles, the history of the city is an integral part of this study. For many years her job involved a close connection to the city's courts, police department and other government agencies. And because she started covering city news as a young reporter when Los Angeles was just in its early stages of growth, Underwood came of age as a newswoman as Los Angeles matured into a metropolis. Together, the following sources capture and preserve a feeling of Los Angeles and its growth.

Yesterday's Los Angeles,⁷¹ an excellent book of photographs by Norman Dash, makes it easier to visualize the city during the first part of the century. Because the pictures are organized by decades, accompanied by several pages of text for each section, the book becomes a valuable reference chronicling the growth of a rapidly changing city.

In Los Angeles: Biography of a City,⁷² John and La Ree Caughey present over 100 writings (by different authors from various time periods), organizing them by subject and to some extent chronologically. Each writing is introduced

with background information about the author and the subject. Because there is such a wide range of topics covered, albeit briefly, many of the chapters touch on areas of Los Angeles history that would be hard to find described elsewhere. The major value of this book is in its depiction of Los Angeles from a wide variety of viewpoints.

Thirty Explosive Years in Los Angeles County⁷³ is a well-written book by a former county supervisor about the growing pains of Los Angeles County in such areas as government, crime control and race relations. The time period, 1930 to 1960, closely parallels Underwood's journalism career when government dynamics and crime were a large part of her concern.

Much of Remi Nadeau's Los Angeles, From Mission to Modern City⁷⁴ is devoted to very early Los Angeles history, but a few of the last chapters give a vivid description of the city and its political climate at the time Underwood began working as a city-side reporter. An informal bibliography describing the usefulness of the author's sources facilitates further research.

The chapter of Carey McWilliams' The Education of Carey McWilliams⁷⁵ that describes Los Angeles when he first arrived in the 1920s is so full of imagery that it is worth several chapters written by less talented writers.

The last few chapters of Morrow Mayo's easy-to-read history of Los Angeles⁷⁶ provides some background

information about the nature of the city during the 1920s. The descriptive bibliographical notes at the end of the book contain several leads to other reference sources.

John D. Weaver's Los Angeles: The Enormous Village,⁷⁷ covering the years 1769 to 1980, provides good background information in an easy-to-use format with a useful index.

Los Angeles: City of Dreams⁷⁸ by Harry Carr is interesting to this study because it's a view of the city through the eyes of a journalist who worked in Los Angeles during the early part of the century.

Although a 1946 article in Life magazine⁷⁹ concentrates on the wacky side of Los Angeles, it contains some bits and pieces of background information, statistics and anecdotes that paint a vivid picture of the city during the 1940s. For this study it is interesting to have some insight into the city's atmosphere during the time when Underwood was promoted to city editor.

Methodology Sources

The following sources provided the organizational framework and guidance necessary to write a biographical study based on the historical research method. And because Underwood is a woman, an attempt was made to find methodological approaches that deal specifically with women in addition to a broad range of material dealing more generally with historical research.

The Critical Method in Historical Research and Writing⁸⁰ was the best reference source found dealing specifically with writing a master's thesis on an historical subject. Although the book is nearly thirty years old, it offers a comprehensive, step-by-step procedure for conducting the research, analyzing the data and writing the study.

In a more general way, the Modern Researcher⁸¹ provided an excellent framework for scholarly research and contains several sections dealing specifically with historical method. It also has an excellent bibliography that is useful for discovering further sources.

Telling Lives, the Biographer's Art,⁸² a compilation of articles by noted biographers, was useful to a small degree for discovering the techniques experts use to get beyond a surface treatment of the subjects.

Biography: The Craft of the Calling⁸³ is a delightful book written by biographer Catharine Bowen Drinker to answer the questions would-be biographers ask during her lectures. Her advice, based on personal experience, is both practical and inspirational in dealing with the pleasures and pitfalls of writing a biography.

"Private Lives: An Added Dimension for Understanding Journalism," an article by Susan Henry,⁸⁴ was valuable to this thesis because it discusses the value of new historical methods that are being used to study women. The inter-disciplinary approach presented by her is applicable

to a study of Underwood. The notes at the end of the article contained leads to other good sources for further study.

Two articles by Gerda Lerner, "New Approaches to the Study of Women in American History,"⁸⁵ and "Placing Women in History,"⁸⁶ were valuable sources for this thesis because they deal specifically with the treatment of women, who Lerner feels have been ignored by traditional historians (who are usually men). The ideas presented here were very useful in analyzing Underwood's place in journalism history.

Conclusions About the State of the Literature

In general, there is no lack of source material available in most areas of research needed to conduct this study. Secondary material about Underwood is relatively scarce, however, even though primary material is abundant.

Fortunately, a number of biographies about Underwood's contemporaries, both male and female, help fill in the gap. Many of these books provide enlightening information about both the status of newspaperwomen and the day-to-day experiences of reporters and editors of Underwood's day. More importantly, many of these books illustrate the often-chaotic, fast-paced atmosphere that is associated with the excitement of newspaper work during the first part of the century. Read as a group, they provide a fascinating framework with which to analyze Underwood's

career.

An interesting note is the discovery that male reporters of that era seem to have no more biographies written about them than female reporters. And books about both sexes tend to be autobiographies, suggesting perhaps that first-person accounts were more publishable.

Although spread out in a variety of places, sources on women in management and sexual bias in the newsroom (current and historical) do exist and are generally well-researched and insightful.

There are also excellent sources on Los Angeles history from and about the period of time covered in this study. And a few of them contain excellent photographs of the Los Angeles that used to be.

The sources found on general journalism history and on William Randolph Hearst are thorough enough to provide the background information necessary for this study. And although only a few books were found dealing exclusively and/or extensively with Los Angeles journalism history, one of those books is very comprehensive. If only it focused on the Herald Examiner instead of the Los Angeles Times, it would have been much better.

Finding a suitable model on which to base the methodology for this thesis was difficult. However, sources on historical and biographical method appear to be clearly written with an easy-to-use "how to" approach. Several journal articles dealing specifically with

historical methodology used with women subjects are especially valuable.

Importance of Thesis to Journalism History

The lack of secondary material on Underwood and the relatively small number of biographies written about journalists (both male and female) during the first half of the century indicates a need for this type of study. Not only will this thesis add to the literature on male and female journalists during that era, it will also contribute to the surprisingly small amount of scholarly research done on Los Angeles journalism.

Although Underwood's autobiography discusses her life from her own perspective, there has never been an academic treatment of her career (and what it meant to journalism history) which spanned over four decades of Los Angeles history.

Because this thesis will focus on the way her personality, background and particular environmental factors helped her break the management barrier to become an accepted member of an exclusive "club" of newsmen, it should also add to the current knowledge about the nature of sexual bias in the newsroom and provide lessons for contemporary women journalists.

CHAPTER II NOTES

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⁶⁹Mickey Cohen (as told to Peer Nugent), Mickey Cohen: In My Own Words (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975).

⁷⁰Dean Jennings, "Mickey Cohen," Saturday Evening

Post, September 20, 1958, pp. 23-25, 85-88.

⁷¹Norman Dash, Yesterday's Los Angeles (Miami: E.A. Seemann Publishing, 1976).

⁷²John Caughey and LaRee Caughey, Los Angeles: Biography of a City (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

⁷³John Anson Ford, Thirty Explosive years in Los Angeles County (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1961).

⁷⁴Remi Nadeau, Los Angeles: From Mission to Modern City (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1960).

⁷⁵Carey McWilliams, The Education of Carey McWilliams (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978).

⁷⁶Morrow Mayo, Los Angeles (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1933).

⁷⁷John D. Weaver, Los Angeles: The Enormous Village 1781-1981 (Santa Barbara, CA: Capra Press, 1980).

⁷⁸Harry Carr, Los Angeles: City of Dreams (New York: Appleton-Century, 1935).

⁷⁹Roger Butterfield, "Los Angeles is the Damndest Place," Life, November 22, 1943, pp. 15, 102-4.

⁸⁰Homer Carey Hockett, The Critical Method in Historical Research and Writing (New York: MacMillan Co., 1955).

⁸¹Jacques Barzun and Henry Graff, The Modern Researcher, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977).

⁸²Marc Pachter, ed., Telling Lives, The Biographer's Art (Washington, D.C.: New Republic Books, 1979).

⁸³Catharine Drinder Bowan, Biography: The Craft and the Calling (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1969).

⁸⁴Susan J. Henry, "Private Lives: An Added Dimension for Understanding Journalism History," Journalism History 6 (Winter 1979-80): 98-102.

⁸⁵Gerda Lerner, "New Approaches to the Study of Women in American History," Journal of Social History 3 (Fall 1969): 53-62.

⁸⁶Gerda Lerner, "Placing Women in History," Feminist Studies 3 (Fall 1975): 5-14.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This study of Agness Underwood is based on the historical research method. As defined in a Guide to Historical Method, this approach (which incorporates many concepts from social and behavioral science methodology) sets up criteria by which to examine and analyze data from the past.¹ More specifically, the method used in this thesis is narrowed to a biographical approach, which, according to noted biographer Catharine Drinker Bowen, is somewhat different in spirit than the method used by a straight historian.²

Bowen sees the biographer as a historical journalist who "searches for news of his hero and for every attending circumstance that will contribute to or enlighten this news."³ Because the subject of this study is a heroine, it utilizes an article by Susan Henry in Journalism History which suggests methodology techniques that are especially useful for understanding the lives of women journalists.⁴

Henry's findings, based on a study of early women printers, reveal a strong correlation between the

journalist's professional and private lives.⁵ Although Underwood may have had little else in common with early women printers, her gender also created a strong inter-relationship between her public and private lives. For this reason, this author will adapt the idea of looking at the whole of Underwood's daily existence, not just her public activities.

Key Sources of Data

The Agness Underwood Collection

Donated to the journalism department at California State University, Northridge and housed in the Urban Archives on campus, this collection of periodicals, personal papers, documents and photographs (dated 1930-1982) was invaluable to this study because much of the material is not available anywhere else. Utilization of this resource will be discussed in further detail later in the chapter.

Personal Interviews and Correspondence

Additional information was obtained through personal interviews, phone interviews and/or correspondence with the following people:

Agness Underwood, interviewed in Northridge, California, May 1, 1983.

Mary Evelyn Weed, Agness Underwood's daughter, who lives in Phoenix, Arizona. Correspondence between April 8,

1986, and March 23, 1987.

Jack Smith, Los Angeles Times columnist and former employee of Agness Underwood's during the late 1940s and early 1950s, interviewed in Los Angeles, March 7, 1985.

Gladwyn Hill, journalist formerly with the New York Times Los Angeles bureau, interviewed in Los Angeles, July 1, 1985.

Rilla Underwood, Agness Underwood's former daughter-in-law, interviewed in Carpenteria, California, August 12, 1984.

Fran O'Neill, retired public relations person and close friend of Agness Underwood, interviewed in Los Angeles, November 10, 1984.

Video and Audio Tapes

A video-taped interview with Agness Underwood made in 1976 by Natalie Holtzman⁶ was useful for this study because it captured Underwood's facial expressions, speaking voice, gestures and other personality traits as she reminisced about her career. Although the tape is somewhat primitive technically and the anecdotes Underwood told are mostly familiar, this video resource did the one thing a printed one couldn't--it provided a visual, animated picture of Underwood discussing the past in her own words.

A 1982 audio-taped interview with Agness Underwood was valuable to this study mainly because she identified people and places represented in many of the photographs

contained in the Agness Underwood Collection.⁷

Autobiography

Newspaperwoman, Underwood's autobiography, was valuable to this study as the first-person account of how she viewed her life and career at the time the book was published (1949). Although it was ghostwritten by Underwood's long-time friend and colleague Foster Goss,⁸ the book appears to represent the image Underwood wanted portrayed to the public. Of particular significance to this thesis were the sections discussing Underwood's unhappy childhood and her struggle as a young woman to find financial and emotional stability, and her first impressions of the newspaper business and the motivational forces which led to her becoming a top-notch journalist. Also interesting were Underwood's views on other women journalists, crime-reporting, her relationships with colleagues, her family and her sources.

Profiles and Obituaries

Newspaper and magazine profiles of Agness Underwood, including obituaries, were used in this study to understand her media image.

Thesis Design

Use of Secondary Sources

In order to establish an organizational framework to

select and analyze primary data, a thorough search for secondary material relevant to Underwood's life was conducted.

Careful, analytical notes were taken on this material and all other research sources reviewed for this study. Trends, patterns, unusual omissions and possible interview questions were noted when appropriate.

Background information was gathered on the history of Los Angeles and its newspapers, concentrating on the years 1900 through 1966, the period shortly before and during Underwood's journalism career, which was based entirely in Los Angeles.

An attempt was made to find books, periodicals and photographs that conveyed a sense of the city as it was when Underwood first arrived and how it changed over the years.

A major area of interest was the growth and change of Los Angeles journalism, especially Hearst's Herald Examiner (and its predecessors), during Underwood's working years, 1926 through 1968.

Material on women as journalists, both historical and contemporary, was utilized to more fully understand the significance of Underwood's accomplishments as a newspaperwoman during the first part of the century. These sources included biographies of women journalists (current newspaperwomen, as well as contemporaries of Underwood), and studies done on women in newspaper management and on

job opportunities for newspaperwomen.

Biographies of newspapermen also were used to evaluate Underwood's career. An attempt was made to discover what aspects of certain newspapermen's personalities and backgrounds provided insight into Underwood's success.

General journalism history sources and books on William Randolph Hearst were searched to find background information relevant to Underwood's career as a Hearst employee and help place her in journalism history.

Secondary sources were particularly valuable in establishing a chronology of Underwood's life by revealing landmarks and key events that provided a direction and a context for gathering and evaluating the primary data. Once a broad range of these sources were re-examined, the primary material was gathered.

Primary Sources

The major source of primary material for this study was from a collection of Underwood's personal letters, periodicals, photographs and memorabilia housed in the Urban Archives at California State University, Northridge. The collection has items dated as early as 1930 and as late as 1982.

Randomly stored in 17 cardboard boxes, the collection came with everything from old dress tags and gum wrappers to the original, unedited manuscript of Newspaperwoman.

There is a large amount of personal correspondence between Underwood and members of her family and numerous letters from mobster Mickey Cohen during an incarceration in prison. Articles written about Underwood, saved from a clipping service over a twenty-year period, make up a large portion of the collection.

The collection not only represents bits and pieces of Underwood's life over a half a century, it also says something about the person who chose to save all of it. And because she seemingly saved all of it, some form of organization was necessary before seriously examining the data.

In order to better evaluate the significance of the material in the collection (even for sorting purposes) and further establish a time line for Underwood's life, a careful reading of Newspaperwoman (in both published and unedited forms) preceded examining the other data in the collection.

Notes were taken on important dates, events and achievements in Underwood's life. Names of significant people in Underwood's life were also noted. The published book was compared to the unedited manuscript, with notes taken on anything useful in terms of image or material omitted from the final version.

All material was examined chronologically. Within each time span, periodical coverage about Underwood was read first and used as a guide to decide which of the other

items should be read next. An exception to this chronological order was the long retrospective articles that were written near the end and after her career. These articles were pulled as they were found and read after the initial examination of Newspaperwoman. Like the autobiography, they were useful as a guide to examining the other material.

As everything was examined, notes were taken on new or unusual information, emerging trends and/or patterns on anything that was useful in terms of describing or establishing Underwood's image. Particular attention was paid to material that provided insight into the motivational, environmental and social forces that contributed to the course of Underwood's career.

Notes were taken on apparent gaps in the data which indicated the need to seek the information elsewhere or to serve as the basis for formulating interview questions for Underwood and other people who knew her.

Special attention was paid to the periods and events in Underwood's life that sparked the greatest press coverage, such as her promotion to city editor and the publication of her autobiography. Items were not only read and abstracted in terms of themselves; they also were analyzed as much as possible in relationship to other information that has been gathered.

To a certain extent, the type of item determined the kind of information sought. For example, all of the

articles in the collection written by Underwood were read for the purpose of getting some sense of her skills as a newspaperwoman. Because there were relatively few pieces with her by-line in the collection, it was interesting to note the kinds of things she saved. These articles were also useful for charting a chronology of events important to her life--again, used as a guide for examining other sources. Some of these articles were evaluated individually for quality of content and relevance to her career. but the focus of this thesis is biographical.

Newspaper and periodical coverage about Underwood was searched for many different kinds of information. Background and descriptive material was noted when it was new or revealing. Patterns, changes in the way Underwood was described or referred to, and any references to her sex (subtle or blatant) and its relationship to her performance on the job was of particular interest. Repetition of descriptive adjectives or phrases (indicative of how Underwood was viewed by other journalists and how her image was projected to the general public) was noted. Attention was also paid to how the projection of her image varied from source to source.

Personal correspondence was searched for clues to relationships with friends and family members. Both as individual letters and as a body of correspondence that spans over fifty years, these pieces of Underwood's past revealed a sense of the person from a non-public point of

view. As with all of the data that was reviewed, notes were taken on emerging patterns, new and/or interesting information and changes that provided insight into Underwood's life.

Although little attention was paid to the numerous greeting cards, thank-you notes and other similar memorabilia as individual items (unless there was something unusually interesting or pertinent about them), they were looked at as a group. Just the fact that Underwood seemingly saved every card that was ever mailed to her, again says something about her personality. Other striking patterns were also noted.

After all of the material in the collection was examined, a search was conducted for additional primary material to fill in some of the gaps noted during the data gathering. This was done by going back to reference sources such as Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature and similar publications to try and track down the appropriate information. A search of the card catalogs and shelves of several local libraries was also conducted.

After the printed material was read and abstracted, the same process was used to extract significant information from visual and audio sources. Again, particular attention was paid to the way Underwood described herself in interviews, the way she seemed to be perceived by the interviewer (paying attention to the kinds of questions asked) and the anecdotes Underwood chose to

tell and the kinds of questions she tended to avoid answering.

An effort was made to note facial expressions (on videotapes) and listen for voice intonations that might be revealing of either the material discussed or Underwood's personality in general.

When the majority of available printed and audio and video material was reviewed, an effort was made to contact former employees, co-workers, friends and relatives of Underwood. They were interviewed to correlate and elaborate on known information and were encouraged to provide new information. The focus of these interviews was on Underwood's ability to break the management barrier, her survival of over forty years of changing Los Angeles journalism, her image as a newspaperwoman and a person, and how that image changed over the years.

In many cases questions were tailored to the specific information desired from a particular respondent. The following questions were typical of those asked:

1) What aspects of Underwood's character do you feel contributed to her success as a newspaperwoman?

2) What do you feel were her greatest areas of weakness?

3) In what ways (if any) do you feel her sex affected her job and/or the course of her career?

4) How do you feel Underwood's capabilities as a reporter and/or an editor compared to other newswomen of

her day? Other newsmen?

5) Do you have a favorite anecdote about Underwood that you feel best illustrates the person you know?

6) How would you describe Underwood's relationship with other newsmen? Other newswomen? Government officials?

7) It has been said that Underwood made both friends and enemies with various members of the underworld. Can you comment on any of these relationships?

When the interviewing process was complete, I thoroughly reviewed all of the primary and secondary source material. Items were re-read, re-evaluated and compared to each other in various combinations to look for new evidence, connections, patterns and insights. This included re-reading background information about Los Angeles history, journalism history and women in management, in addition to all of the primary data.

Conclusions then were drawn about Underwood's place in journalism history, and the environmental, motivational and social context from which she emerged.

Procedures for Overcoming Bias

A bias inherent in this study was separating the real Agness Underwood from the image that has been created by the telling and retelling of favorite anecdotes (both by Underwood herself and by those who knew and wrote about her). It was inevitable that many of the people who were

interviewed for this study, including Underwood herself, were responsible for the creation of her image and likely were selective in giving information.

Every attempt was made to uncover all sides of Underwood's character, including her frailties, by making an effort to interview someone from a competition newspaper or others who might not have a reverential attitude toward her.

To some extent preconceptions about Underwood also colored the way I viewed the material. With this in mind, every effort was made to read and listen to opposing viewpoints and evaluate everything as objectively as possible. Still it is doubtful that all bias was completely eliminated. As biographer Catharine Drinker Bowen said, "All history is written from a point of view and no one could write with pure objectivity."

Underwood died July 3, 1984 before she could be interviewed extensively for this study. It is hoped that by interviewing a wide range of people who knew her (in various capacities and at different periods in her life) and by reading a broad range of literature about her, the key areas were dealt with as accurately and deeply as possible.

It was also hard as a contemporary writer dealing with a historical subject, albeit recently historical, to fully grasp the feel of the early part of the century and the attitudes that were prevalent then. Again, an attempt

was made to read as much background information as possible and talk to several people who lived through that era.

Justification of Design

At the base of the organizational framework for the research in this thesis are six qualities described in The Modern Researcher that are essential for conducting a disciplined study: accuracy, order, logic, honesty, self-awareness and imagination.¹⁰ Taken one by one, these qualities help summarize and explain the design of this study:

1) Accuracy. A serious attempt was made in this study to take accurate and clear notes on everything from citation notations to interview notes. Also every effort was made to accurately inspect and otherwise utilize sources.

2) Order. The data for this thesis was read in chronological order, except where source material must be read first (regardless of year) to provide guidance or context for other research. The chronological sequence helped in understanding the flow of Underwood's life and facilitated identification of emerging patterns, changes and growth in the order in which they occurred. Order also meant developing systems for verifying facts, developing techniques for analysis, rereading and regrouping evidence until all of the bits and pieces of information became meaningful in terms of the focus of this study.

3) Logic. Every attempt was made to use reason in seeking relationships between sources and in analyzing the data. Logic was also used in the practical aspects of research for this study such as understanding the way different card catalogs, indexes and other reference sources are arranged. In this way it was hoped that information didn't fall through the cracks for lack of understanding the peculiarities of a particular system.

4) Honesty. The goal of this thesis was to produce as truthful a study as possible. This meant reporting findings that might have been in complete opposition to what was originally hypothesized. It meant working hard to get honest information from sources.

5) Self-awareness. The subject of bias was discussed previously in the chapter and it was admitted that some form of bias is inevitable. However, an attempt was made to be as objective as possible. And when personal bias crept in, it was admitted and dealt with accordingly.

6) Imagination. Goals were set, even if they seemed slightly out of reach, and material was analyzed as creatively as possible. An attempt was also made to use imagination in finding all of possible source material.

In addition to application of the six qualities described in The Modern Researcher, this thesis also has been carefully structured in practical terms. The focus of this thesis was narrowed to fit within a manageable time frame. Access to the Agness Underwood collection of

personal papers not only enriched the body of research available for study, it also eliminated hours of searching for information on illusive pieces of Underwood's life. This saved time was spent doing the kind of indepth biographical study that might have been impossible without this valuable resource.

CHAPTER III NOTES

¹Robert Jones Shafer, ed., A Guide to Historical Method (Homewood, Il.: Dorsey Press, 1969), p. 3.

²Catharine Drinker Bowen, Biography: The Craft and the Calling (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1968), p. 49.

³Ibid.

⁴Susan J. Henry, "Private Lives: An added Dimension for Understanding Journalism History," Journalism History 6 (Winter 1979-80): 98-99.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Agness Underwood Collection, housed in the Urban Archives, California State University, Northridge.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Underwood admitted Goss wrote the final draft for Newspaperwoman in a deposition (see Chapter 8 for complete details) given on July 13, 1981, p. 6.

⁹Bowen, p. 92.

¹⁰Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, The Modern Researcher, 3rd ed., (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc., 1977), pp. 48-50.

CHAPTER IV

THE EARLY YEARS

In the 1920s, there was a growing atmosphere of acceptance, if not enthusiasm, for women reporters on most newspapers. Novels about female reporters apparently inspired an unprecedented number of young women to pursue careers in journalism. Indeed, during that decade, the number of women in reporting and editing jobs doubled to almost 12,000, making them 24 per cent of the profession.¹ But when Agness Underwood walked into the offices of the Los Angeles Record in the autumn of 1926, she was not a young career woman hoping to become the next Nellie Bly. She was a housewife in her mid-twenties with two young children who desperately needed more money to help make ends meet. "Prices were high then," she explained in Newspaperwoman, her autobiography. "I was seeking nothing more than a chance to fortify my family with a few extra dollars."²

As she saw it later, the fates were with her the day she heard about the job at the Record. It was just a job as a switchboard operator, and a temporary one at that.

But for Underwood, who at the time was becoming frustrated trying to make her husband Harry's paycheck stretch further than it could possibly go, it sounded like an answer to her prayers. The money from two weeks' work might help pay some of their mounting bills.³ And besides, there was the matter of wanting some silk stockings.

Regardless of whether or not a family spat over a pair of silk stockings was responsible for changing the course of Agness Underwood's life, it is a story she told in her book and repeated enough times for it to become part of her legend. According to her autobiography, for the first six years of her marriage she was content to be a homemaker and had never thought of trying to find a job, despite her family's precarious financial situation. That is, until she became tired of economizing by wearing her sister's cast-off silk stockings. "One day," she said, "I asked my husband for money to buy a new pair of stockings. Harried about finances he no doubt regarded as more pressing, he found himself refusing. We quarreled. 'All right,' I said, 'I'll go out and get myself a job.'"⁴

She insisted that at the time she had absolutely no idea of where to begin looking for a job. And she knew going to work would hurt her husband's pride. He had made it clear he wanted to be the sole breadwinner in the family. But when an old friend called the day after the argument and asked Agness if she would be interested in a temporary job on a newspaper switchboard, she did not pass

up the opportunity.⁵ It might have been the spat that gave her the push, but she had an instinct for taking care of herself long before she was old enough to wear silk stockings.

Early Childhood--Coping with Family Tragedy and Separation

Born December 17, 1902, in a "'poor Irish' section"⁶ of San Francisco, Agness⁷ May Wilson was the eldest daughter of Clifford Wilson and his wife, the former Mamie Sullivan.⁸ As a very young child, Agness moved frequently, her new homes determined by where her father, a journeyman glassblower, could get work. Despite the transient nature of his job, the Wilsons were a close family and by the time Agness was four years old, she had a baby sister, Leona, to travel with her.⁹

In November 1907, when Agness was almost five and Leona was not yet two, Mamie Wilson died in childbirth.¹⁰ It was a tragedy that dramatically shook Agness' sense of security and would profoundly affect her both directly and indirectly for the rest of her life. Although her father was still alive, in reality she and her sister became orphans. As much as Clifford Wilson loved his daughters, his job made it impossible to take care of two young girls as he traveled throughout the country. At first, he found a temporary home for them with a male relative in Terre Haute, Indiana. After that, Underwood remembered, the sisters were moved

around "like checkers," often winding up in the hands of public charity or insensitive caretakers who made the girls' lives miserable.¹¹

Finally, distressed with the way his daughters were being treated, Wilson found two foster homes in Portland, Indiana, each willing to take one of his girls. Leona moved in with a farm family on the outskirts of town and Agness went to live with Charles and Belle Ewry. For Agness, her new home was a mixed blessing. The Ewrys had three sons, all older than Agness. The oldest, Ralph, and Agness liked each other immediately. He nicknamed her "Boo" and became her friend and protector. She began to feel like she would finally unpack her suitcase: "Portland was stability for me. Between the death of my mother and my return there, I had gone to seven schools in the years before I was seven."¹²

At the Ewrys', all of her material needs were once again taken care of. When writing of those days she remembered,

I had plenty of clothes, sturdy and warm. Food was substantial and wholesome, well-prepared by an Indiana mother and housewife who was liberal with cream and butter. In that semirural atmosphere, vegetables and fruits were canned and preserved or jellied. I helped in their preparation. We ate bountifully, winter and summer.¹³

But her writing also indicates that her feelings about the Ewrys were ambivalent at best. While her body was being nourished physically, her emotional needs were

not being met. It's interesting to note that many of the qualities that distinguished her as an adult--loyalty, generosity, sense of fun and sensitivity to the needs of her family, friends and co-workers were the very things that were not shown to her in childhood by the people around her after her mother died.

Agness remembered the Ewrys' household as a serious environment, often made bearable only by the kindness of Ralph. She said in her autobiography, "Mischievous was not tolerated. My foster mother was severe and believed in discipline that applied the rod, which sometimes was a broomstick. Ralph would intercede for me. I shall never forget his goodness, sympathy, and understanding."¹⁴ Frequently she said she would cry herself to sleep and agonize. "A good American family had taken me to its bosom, loved me, but I felt unloved and alone."¹⁵

Agness also resented being separated from her father and younger sister. She missed Leona, but more than that, she felt responsible for her. As she grieved for her mother, she thought about her mother's last wish. As Mamie was dying, she had asked Agness always to take care of her little sister.¹⁶ And while young Agness worried about not living up to her responsibility to Leona, she unsuccessfully tried to believe her father had not abandoned her. "As much as I fought the idea," she said, "I feared my father had forgotten me--didn't want me. For some reason, my foster mother never showed me or told me about the letters

he wrote."¹⁷

The insecurity she felt as a child followed her into adulthood. Underwood's daughter, Mary Evelyn Weed, believed the feeling never left her. She said, "I definitely feel the lack of love and security in Mother's early years was the reason for her fear of loneliness and why family was so important to her."¹⁸

Learning to Survive

Underwood's work ethic also was established early in life. Later, when her job as city editor brought her widespread recognition, interviewers would marvel at the way she would be at the job before dawn, put in more than a full day at work and then go home and maintain a household. Her daughter said, "My mother did not know what a sick day was, she was at her desk every morning at 4:30 a.m. She neither drank coffee or smoked, so she didn't know any such thing as a coffee break. And she never took a lunch hour. Usually she had an office boy run out and her a sandwich."¹⁹

From the time Agness went to live with her foster family, working hard was a way of life. She later remembered with resentment how she had to wash windows in full view of her friends who were playing and having a good time. Playtime came only after all of her chores were completed. But as she admitted in her autobiography, the routine generated a lifelong attitude of work before

play.²⁰

As a child, she also was protected from what her foster family perceived as negative outside influences. The woman who would later become friends with many of the biggest movie stars in Hollywood did not see her first motion picture until she was about 13 because she was brought up to believe that movies were "The Work of the Devil."²¹

At the Ewrys', social life meant church, and Bible study was an integral part of daily life. Sundays were the highlight of the week. Dressed in her finest clothes, Agness faithfully attended religious school, missing only one Sunday in nine years. By the time she was 14, she had become such an adept student of the Bible that the Methodist Church asked her to teach a class for young children.²²

Schoolwork also came easily for Agness, maybe too easily. She admitted, "Perhaps I did too well in my studies. I would finish my lessons before the other pupils did. Then the Irish in me found time for pranks. Even so, I skipped three grades."²³ By the time she entered high school in 1916, her enthusiasm for school was waning. According to her grades from that year, aside from music classes in which she consistently excelled, she was no more than an average student. As the year progressed, her grades generally declined and by the end of tenth grade her formal education was over.²⁴

At the same time, World War I was underway and Ralph,

the one person in her foster family Agness felt close to, left home to become an officer in the National Guard. She wrote an essay that appeared in a local Portland paper (possibly her first published piece of writing) urging Americans to support the Red Cross war effort. If the essay was a school assignment, it was likely one she undertook out of a genuine concern for her foster brother. In the article's introduction she is described as "Miss Agnes Ewry of the 10-B grade, a sister of Capt. Ralph W. Ewry, now at Camp Selby, Miss."²⁵

Although it's written with the emotional zeal of a teenager, the essay shows Agness had a flair for using words. Her impassioned plea for Americans to join the Red Cross in an effort "to bind up the wounds of a bleeding nation"²⁶ also provides some insight into how the war affected her sense of patriotism and desire to be part of a support system at home.

Forty years later, when she became city editor, she often was described as a woman doing a man's job. But at 16, her thoughts on women's roles, at least during war time, were traditional. She wrote:

The Red Cross needs everybody's support...The ladies have a chance to sew and knit during all their spare time. The men can't do this of course but since they are asking the women to have meatless and wheatless days, why can't the men have a smokeless day and give that money to the Red Cross? With that money the Red Cross will buy yarn for the women to knit with and material for them to sew with.²⁷

She concluded by writing, "Be patriotic and don't give Xmas presents this year but give the dollar to someone who needs it."²⁸ This final suggestion is quite poignant in light of the fact that as a youngster Agness was rarely indulged with gifts or money. Her daughter many years later recalled that rather than being bitter about the deprivation:

she always went all out for Christmas and birthdays, the reason being she remembered many of them when she never received a gift of any kind. Every Xmas she would see that every poor and unfortunate person she knew would receive a Xmas gift from her.²⁹

The sentiments expressed in Agness' essay suggest that her generosity toward others began very early in life, despite the austerity of her own circumstances.

At 15, after a year of high school, she quit to work for five dollars a week as a clerk in the basement of Cartwright's department store in Portland.³⁰ "Later," she recalled, "I got a one-dollar raise. I turned three dollars of my pay over to my foster mother. There was nothing wrong in that. In orthodox families youngsters took their wages home to their folks in those days."³¹

If giving up half of her wages was hard for her, it was only a symptom of a larger problem. Living with the Ewrys was becoming unbearable and she was ripe for a change. She missed Ralph, who had been shipped off to France. He was the one member of the family who made her feel as if she belonged. A surviving piece of shipboard

correspondence from him in which he tries to reassure her of his safety shows his brotherly affection. It seems to reflect a close brother-sister bond based on mutual caring and an unspoken understanding of each other's needs. "My Dearest little sister," he wrote. "Your Ouija board had it about right, about coming back," he told her. "I never felt safer than I do on the ship."³²

Despite the letter's warm, humorous tone there was an undercurrent of concern for both his own fate and Agness' circumstances. He told her about a telegram he left at the pier to be sent home when his ship landed safely, unless, he said, "we are submarined, in which case, of course, you will have to collect my insurance, but the only thing we have seen yet which we might take for Subs, were whales." Before closing he reminded her of how much he thought about her and asked her to write often, saying, "You can tell me much more than I can tell you."³³

With Ralph gone, the amount of emotional support she received from the rest of her foster family probably was negligible. It's also likely that the unreconciled feelings of abandonment she felt toward her birth parents contributed to the strained relationship she had with the Ewrys'. After nearly ten years with her foster family she still thought of herself as an orphan--an outsider. Interpreting the Ewry's lack of understanding as rejection, she wrote in her autobiography:

I felt that my foster family really didn't want

me. And I was resentful. I had no right to be, but I was. Resentment probably caused much of the mischief that had gotten me into trouble when I was younger. Now that I was growing up, I had to be prim and ladylike--if a foundling ever could be a lady.³⁴

When Ralph, who was stationed in France, realized the depth of Agness' unhappiness, he thought she might be happier living with someone who was related to her. Despite being so far away, he managed to locate a distant relative of hers in San Francisco and sent her enough money to cover a train ticket and some immediate expenses.³⁵

If the idea of traveling half way across the country alone scared her, it must have been counterbalanced by the prospect of finding a warmer, more tolerable living situation than the one she was leaving behind. Indeed, she probably thought of the trip as a flight from loneliness and rejection--an opportunity to finally find acceptance and family ties.

The day before she left Portland, her foster mother broke some devastating news to her. After remaining mum for years about the whereabouts or condition of her natural father, Mrs. Ewry told Agness that he had recently died of tuberculosis, a result of his years as a glass-blower. The shock of her father's death was compounded when her foster mother also divulged the fact that Clifford Wilson and Leona had been writing letters to Agness for many years--letters Mrs. Ewry purposely hid from the young girl who desperately needed to know her father had not deserted her.

and who intensely wanted some contact with her younger sister. Writing about the disclosure, Underwood said of her foster mother's motivation:

Maybe she thought she was sparing my feelings by waiting until the excitement of leaving before she told me. I'm sure she meant to be considerate. For the first time, she allowed me to read an accumulation of letters my father and my sister had written during the years. She said it "would be better" if I didn't take the letters with me. In all of my speculation about the trip ahead, I wondered what would become of my little sister now that my father and mother were both dead.³⁶

Many years later, when she became city editor, one of the first things she said to her staff of reporters and photographers was "don't ever, ever lie to me."³⁷ At 15, she'd experienced a big enough lie to last a lifetime.

Surviving On Her Own

The trip to San Francisco only served to confirm that her trust in people was misplaced and squelched any optimism she might have had for finding instant happiness. She arrived in November 1918, and moved in with her relative, who lived in an apartment on Geary Street. Although she was not yet 16, Agness knew she would have to pull her own weight, so she immediately set out to find a job. Disheartened after days of not finding work in a city that was quickly overwhelming her, she returned to her relative's apartment. "The landlady met me in the hall," she said. "Crisply she told me that I didn't live there any more. My relative? She had moved. 'Now get out', the

landlady ordered. She was as matter-of-fact as if that were a daily happening with her. She stifled my panicky questions....thrust my suitcase at me. I got out."³⁸

Nothing had really prepared Agness for the anxiety she felt at that moment. Although she had felt alone most of her life, now she really was alone--in a strange city that was far larger and less friendly than the small midwestern town in which she grew up. Standing barely five feet tall, dressed as a school girl with her hair in braided rolls with ribbons on each side and clutching an unsophisticated wicker suitcase, she looked as vulnerable as she felt.³⁹

When the door slammed behind her she felt cut off from everyone she knew. And she was scared. Her panic increased as she sized up the unfamiliar surroundings. She had less than a dollar in her purse and no idea who to turn to for help. The only thing she could think of was to keep moving until she could decide what to do next.⁴⁰

As she climbed aimlessly up and down the hills of the city, her hands became sore and swollen from the weight of her suitcase. She trudged on, too self-conscious to rest, and too tired to think about where she was going. And as the light drained out of the sky, her uneasiness increased. Finally, to her relief, she found herself on Market Street, where the street was flat and the lights were bright.⁴¹

Until that moment, she had been too distraught to remember that she hadn't eaten anything for hours. All of

a sudden she found herself surrounded by all kinds of tempting and exotic things to eat. But her purse was as empty as her stomach.

She stayed hungry. She was too broke and intimidated to go into any of the restaurants. "I wanted to hold on to my little change. Moreover, my eyelids were puffed. They would see I was crying--or trying to stem the tears. What if they called the police? I was afraid of cops. They might put me in jail--or reform school with the 'bad' girls." So she kept on moving, trying to keep a few steps ahead of her fears, not the least of which was the possibility of disgracing herself with the folks back home by being arrested.⁴²

Nightfall came as a relief to Agness. She would be more invisible in the dark. But her hunger persisted and she remembered seeing a candy butcher, a man who sold candy by weight, beside one of the stores she had passed. She searched until she found him and asked him to cut off a dime's worth of taffy. As she chewed ravenously she realized she'd made a mistake. "My teeth began to ache as the candy explored neglected cavities. I was miserable."⁴³ And a dime poorer.

As midnight neared and the people disappeared from the streets, Agness again became afraid of being arrested. Irrational as the thought was, it was a very real fear for her. She remembered thinking, "the glare of Market Street suddenly seemed a searchlight pointing me out to the

police. They might catch me if I let them see me."⁴⁴

As badly as she wanted to get off the street, she realized her options were few. She passed hotels advertising rooms for a dollar a night, but she no longer had even a dollar's worth of change in her pocket. She continued walking even though her feet now ached as badly as her teeth. Eventually she came to Union Square, where she collapsed on a park bench illuminated by the lights of the St. Francis Hotel across the street. It wasn't a bed, but after walking for about ten hours, she was just glad to be off her blistered feet.⁴⁵

With only a thin sweater to protect her from the cold November wind, she shivered and began to think about the irony of the circumstance she was in: "Here I was, an Irish daughter of San Francisco--the San Francisco of warmhearted and generous Irish people--and I was alone, and cold."⁴⁶ She became increasingly stiff and numb as the night wore on and she worried about her bleak prospects in the morning.⁴⁷

Just when she thought all hope was gone, a minor miracle happened. It put her back on her feet, although she was too exhausted to realize it immediately. "Perhaps I dozed or chilled convulsively, for I was dazed and sobbing again. I heard myself answering questions and looked at the blonde lady beside me on the bench. 'Well, honey,' she was saying, 'we're going to do something about you right away. How could that woman do such a thing to

you! You just come along with me.'"48

The "blonde lady" was a bookkeeper named Dolly Peterson⁴⁹ who had noticed Agness as she walked through the park on her way to work. She decided the shivering girl needed the warmth of a good meal, a bath and a bed, and she took her home to the Mary Elizabeth Inn, a Methodist Institution on Bush Street. This turned out to be particularly fortuitous because Agness suddenly remembered a letter she had from a Methodist minister in Portland. And the letter opened a door for her to become a resident at the inn.⁵⁰

Once she had a roof over her head, her luck began to change. She was hired by the White House department store as a messenger for \$45 a month, more than enough to pay \$6.50 a week for room and board. She also was able to take a few business courses through the generosity of one of the other residents of the inn who had paid tuition on a year's worth of instruction and had three months left over that she couldn't use.⁵¹

Going to Los Angeles

Shortly after she finished the business courses, Agness heard from a Hollywood relative who offered her a place to live. She took a steamer down the coast to Los Angeles. "I should have known better," she said later. "But I was still a trusting little country kid."⁵²

The relative, it turned out, had an ulterior motive

for inviting Agness to live with her. She lived in Hollywood and she wanted to groom her very own child star. In her autobiography, Underwood remembered:

She put big bows in my hair, dressed me so that I looked younger than my sixteen years, and traipsed me around to the motion-picture studios. My relative finally realized I was hopeless as film fodder. One day she commanded me to go out and get a job.⁵³

She did. Thanks to the skills she had picked up at the business school she attended on borrowed tuition, she became a \$9 a week comptometer operator at The Broadway department store. The job lasted longer than the welcome at her relative's house. "After three months," Underwood said, "she wadded my few belongings in newspapers (she kept my wicker suitcase) and left the bundle on the front porch, where I found it when I came home from work."⁵⁴

But this time Agness was a little wiser. She was employed and she felt as if she had a "'foothold' in Los Angeles"⁵⁵. She had heard about a Salvation Army home for working girls through a co-worker at the department store and she applied for residency. Room and board were \$7.50 a week. It was there, in the building at 525 South Grand Avenue, that she met her friend, Evelyn Connors, the woman who would get her her first job on a newspaper.⁵⁶

In her autobiography Underwood remembered their first meeting:

On the first night at dinner I watched her; she was the only person near my age. I was too timid

to speak to her. I observed that surreptitiously she was stuffing soup crackers in the pocket of her apron. I sneaked some and, after dinner followed her to the laundry room in the basement where she was beginning to iron a dress.⁵⁷

Summoning her courage, Agness reached into her pocket and pulled out a handful of crackers and offered them to the girl. The friendship between Agness, a 16 year-old and Evelyn, an orphan two years younger, began.⁵⁸

Shortly after the young women met, they discovered they could make more money as telephone operators than either of them was making at her current job. During training, they were paid \$13.50 a week and afterward, Agness became an operator downtown and was paid \$16 a week. The extra money seemed like a fortune to her and she was even able to save some. But once again, after a few months, just as luck seemed to be with her, she made another move.⁵⁹

And history repeated itself. Despite past experiences that should have made her wary of golden opportunities, she placed her trust in a girl she met at the Salvation Army home who begged her to move to Salt Lake City to help her keep house for her father, a railroadman. Agness agreed and they moved into the house near the Mormon Temple. But after two months in the cold Utah winter, Agness' friend decided she missed the California sun and they both moved back to Los Angeles, jobless.⁶⁰

It didn't take long for Agness to become employed. The Pig n' Whistle restaurant hired her as a waitress and

there she met Harry Underwood, a young man several years her senior who worked at the fountain. They became friends and when Agness' life looked like it was going to take another turn for the worse, she confided in him. Her Hollywood relative, the one who had taken her in the year before only to coldly toss her out in the street when she discovered Agness was not star material, had resurfaced and was insisting that Agness move back in with her again. Her request was accompanied with a threat of police intervention if she didn't comply because of her status as a minor.⁶¹

Listening to Agness tearfully recount her past experiences with the woman, Harry tried to allay her fears. Finally he explained to her that if they got married right away, it would solve her problem. Her relative would have no recourse.⁶²

Agness agreed. Three weeks later, on April 28, 1920, age 17 and still looking like a young school girl, she married Harry Underwood.⁶³ Although she made the decision quickly, there is every reason to believe it was based on reason as much as impulse. She had little to lose. She was a teen-ager, alone in a big city, faced with the daily challenge of providing for herself. As much as she longed to feel loved and secure, a sense of belonging had eluded her thus far. So aside from the immediate practical consideration of avoiding another disastrous stay with her unpredictable, callous relative, marriage promised another

paycheck to help pay for the bills and a chance to become part of a family. She said of that time, "I was a waitress and he was a soda jerk. I was an orphan; he was an adopted son. We knew what fighting the world meant."⁶⁴

Marriage and a mutual determination to better themselves did not insulate Agness and Harry from a constant battle with the fates and the bill collectors. Shortly after exchanging vows, they moved to Ocean Park, on the west side of Los Angeles, where Harry managed a fountain lunch counter and Agness waitressed. In August of 1920 she collapsed and was rushed to the hospital with severe pains. She had had a tubal pregnancy and needed surgery. She remembers being so naive at the time that the doctor had trouble making her understand what was happening to her.⁶⁵

After the operation, too weak to work and nervous over unpaid bills, she let her husband talk her into marrying him again--this time for money. Harry told her about a dance hall promotion that was paying couples a hundred dollars to tie the knot. Once he convinced a skeptical Agness that there was no law against a man marrying his own wife, they got another marriage license and said their "I do's" to the tune of ten \$10 bills. For the time being the wolf was kept away from their door again.⁶⁶

Her second wedding took place on October 14, 1920, and a wedding book that she kept to commemorate the

occasion shows for the first time her first name being written with the distinctive double "s" at the end.⁶⁷ Prior to that, letters and other documents bearing her name appeared with only one "s" at the end of her first name. It is not known why she decided to add the extra letter. Perhaps she was asserting her individuality. But more likely she felt by reshaping her name she was affirming the beginning of a new phase of her life--one in which she had some control.

She and Harry moved back downtown and as soon as she regained her strength, she took a job as a cashier and comptometer operator in a downtown silk store near Fourth and Broadway. She soon became pregnant again and when it became obvious, she left her job, as was the custom at that time. Before she left, she got her friend Evelyn a job in the shop. She had lost touch with Evelyn after leaving the Salvation Army Home, but had recently run into her and discovered her friend was now married and living in the same neighborhood. The two young women were very happy to renew their friendship.⁶⁸

Despite the ambivalent feelings Agness had for her foster parents, she asked them to come to Los Angeles for the birth of her baby. She was apprehensive about giving birth and they were the closest thing to a family she had. She explained "I never had been near a family while a baby was born. In my ignorance I was scared. I wrote my foster mother, asking whether she could be present at the birth."⁶⁹

Regardless of any insensitivity they displayed toward Agness while she lived with them, the Ewrys must have felt a strong emotional bond toward their foster daughter. A full month before the birth, they traveled more than half way across the country to join her. When they arrived they unloaded huge quantities of Indiana farm food--ham, a side of bacon and an assortment of homemade goods and jams. They also paid for half of the rent and grocery bills until they left.⁷⁰

A letter written to Agness by her foster brother Ralph, prior to the birth of her first child, Mary Evelyn, discussed the Ewrys' tight financial circumstances at the time, further suggesting that her foster parents cared enough about her to come to her aid despite considerable hardship to themselves.⁷¹

Her daughter was born on January 17, 1922. According to her baby book, she was named Mary after both Agness' mother Mamie and Harry's mother Mary, and Evelyn after two of Agness' friends. Eleven days after the baby's birth, she came home from the hospital and immersed herself in domestic responsibilities. "I was serious about being a good mother and a good wife," she said.⁷² The baby book she kept for Mary Evelyn seems to substantiate her devotion. It is filled with pictures, observations and memorabilia of her daughter's first year.⁷³

By this time Agness had also tracked down her sister Leona, who was living in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and began

a correspondence with her. The sisters were eager to reunite⁷⁴ and after Leona finished high school, she came to Los Angeles, moving in with Agness and Harry. Although Leona was now grown and soon had a job, Agness must have thought she was finally fulfilling the promise to her mother about caring for her little sister.

But her peace of mind was shattered within a few years. When Leona was only 24 years old she committed suicide after falling in love with a man she hoped to marry. When she discovered he already had a wife and had no lasting interest in her, it was more than she could bear. Beyond the grief Agness felt after losing her sister for the second time--this time irrevocably--she would always feel guilty that she had not carried out her mother's last wish.⁷⁵

Constantly plagued by a lack of money, the Underwoods spent from 1921 to 1926 following opportunities all over the country. Their second child, George, was born in Oakland in June 1925.⁷⁶ Finally, in 1926, with both young children in tow, they returned to Southern California. This time it would be for good--Agness and the city of Los Angeles would mature and blossom together.

Conclusions

When Agness Underwood died in 1984, she was described in one obituary as being "aggressive but discriminate, gentle but tough."⁷⁷ The description was typical of the

way she was perceived in the press from the time she became newsworthy enough to be profiled. She was viewed as a paradox. According to family and friends, the image was correct. And why not? From her earliest years, her life was filled with contradictions and conflicts. She was a mischievous, strong-willed but sensitive child, who from the time she was 6, was reared by stern, rigid foster parents who kept her body well-fed and clothed while her psyche cried out for attention and unqualified love. While she craved fun, her foster parents demanded hard work, serious Bible study and discipline in every aspect of life.

The struggle between her rebellious nature and her foster parents' need to control may have made for an unhappy childhood but it probably instilled in her several survival skills that later made her successful in her career. Even the damage to her self-esteem may have had some positive ramifications. As her daughter pointed out, "I don't think she ever completely overcame her feeling of an inferiority complex. It kept her very humble, and it is very possible it motivated her to achieve more than others who had it easier."⁷⁸

While another person raised in similar circumstances might have rebelled with anti-social behavior or succumbed to total complacency, Underwood did neither. She seemed to have had an uncanny knack for retaining the right lessons--honesty, integrity and a disciplined approach to work. She also learned or instinctively knew early on just how far

she could push authority without jeopardizing her position. As a foster child, knowing her limits meant keeping a roof--the same roof--over her head. Later, as a novice reporter, it meant pursuing her goal of working city-side by doing everything and more that her bosses asked her to do. By following the rules and absorbing everything she could while she waited for a break, she became an asset rather than a threat to her superiors.

In retrospect, the disparate personality qualities she carried into adult life made her unique among her colleagues at work and probably were partially responsible for her eventual rise into management. Her strict religious upbringing instilled a code of ethics in her that gained the trust of news sources and the respect of fellow news people. The uncertainty and hardship she endured as an orphan gave her an empathy toward life's victims and underdogs. And though the empathy made her an easy touch for anyone down on his luck, it also gave her an edge in eliciting stories from victims of tragedies, as well as perpetrators of crimes. They seemed to sense her empathetic attitude and trust her enough to talk freely.

When they were down or in need of help, she was there as a friend. One of her earliest and most profound tragedies, the loss of her mother, seemed to instill in her a lifelong need to nurture others. When a fellow reporters' seam ripped or a button came loose, Underwood was there with her needle and thread. As an editor, the

maternal feelings she projected toward the reporters who worked under her served as a motivational force for them. While she expected top-notch work from them, she also felt very protective toward them. In return, they felt obligated to live up to her expectations. Jack Smith, a columnist for the Los Angeles Times who worked as a reporter for Underwood during the 1940s, recalled that she could be very sensitive toward a reporter's personal problems, often sympathizing with them about marital disputes. Even on work assignments, she personalized the job. He remembered, "She would feel quite let down if you didn't come up with something. She never bawled me out or any of us out that I know of, but she could make you feel like you disappointed your mother."⁷⁹

As a newspaperwoman, however, her sensitivity toward others did not prevent her from protecting her own interests. Perhaps the fact that she regarded herself as an orphan after mother's death made her realize at a young age that she would have to rely primarily on herself to get what she wanted out of life. Or perhaps she was just born with an independent, stubborn personality. In any event, once she made her mind up about something she pursued it with determination. From the time she took her first job on a newspaper, over her husband's objections, until the day she retired as the legendary female city editor who held her job longer than any of her male predecessors, she worked tirelessly to accomplish her goals.

Even her determination to succeed and her willingness to work might have stopped her short of what she ultimately accomplished if she had not learned how to deal effectively with rejection. Again, the hard lessons of her youth seemed to help her get past the roadblocks she encountered on the job. There is little doubt that the rejection she experienced during her childhood left indelible scars. Being bounced from home to home after her mother's death because no family would agree to keep her must have been extremely difficult for a child of 6 to accept. As she grew older, because the Ewrys withheld her father's correspondence from her until after his death, she believed her only living parent had totally abandoned her. And when she finally left the Ewrys as a teen-ager, she discovered that her distant relatives in California could be even less accepting and more callous toward her than the family she had left behind.

She must have realized, at least subconsciously, that as grim as her situation seemed at times, she was able to survive the disappointments and setbacks. Rather than letting despondency immobilize her, she turned her fears and anger into determination. She also had the courage to go into new situations unprepared. From the time she was a young teen-ager who gave up the security of her foster family to face an unknown future in California until the day she sat down at the city editor's desk, she seemed to respond to the challenge of what lay ahead, rather than

ever seriously thinking of reversing her direction.

CHAPTER IV NOTES

¹Donna Born, "The Woman Journalist of the 1920s and 1930s in Fiction and in Autobiography" (paper presented to the Qualitative Studies Division, Association for Education in Journalism Annual Convention, Athens Ohio, July 1982), p.2.

²Agness Underwood, Newspaperwoman (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1949), p.15.

³Ibid., p.30

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Stan Leppard, "Aggie's Torrid Era at the Helm of Paper Bared," Long Beach Independent Press-Telegram, 24 August 1980, Lifestyle section, p.1.

⁷Underwood's first name at birth after she was married but for the purpose of consistency, she will be referred to as "Agness" throughout this study.

⁸Letter from Mary Evelyn Weed (Agness Underwood's daughter) to author, February 23, 1987.

⁹Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 15.

¹⁰Letter to author from Mary Evelyn Weed, February 23, 1987 verifies the cause of Mamie's death. The date is taken from a letter dated June 3, 1958, addressed to Joseph Lautman from the Department of Public Health, Belleville, Illinois, the place of Mamie's death. Newspaperwoman (p. 42) explains that Agness was six years old when her mother died. She was born on December 17, 1902, making her not quite five at the time.

¹¹Agness Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 16.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 17. The letter from Mary Evelyn Weed, October 27, 1986, also mentions Mamie Wilson's deathbed request to her daughter.

¹⁷Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 18.

¹⁸Letter from Mary Evelyn Weed to author, October 27, 1987.

¹⁹Letter from Mary Evelyn Weed to author, April 8, 1986.

²⁰Underwood, Newspaperwoman, pp. 18-19.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid., p. 19.

²³Ibid., p. 18. A letter to Joseph Lautman from D.S. Weller, Superintendent of the Portland Wayne Township School District, May 13, 1958, indicates that Agnes [sic] Ewry was promoted to Grade 2B at the end of school year 1908-09; promoted "on trial" to 3B at the end of school year 1910-1911; promoted to 4B at midyear of school year 1911-12 and promoted to 8B "on condition" in Geography at the end of school year 1914-15. It is also interesting to note that she was enrolled in school under the name Agnes (only one "s") Ewry, using her foster parents' surname. According to her daughter, Agness was never formally adopted by the Ewrys and regarded her maiden name as Agness Wilson.

²⁴A transcript for Agnes [sic] Ewry from Portland High School indicates her grades for her final year of high school were English-88%, 90%, 79% and 76%; Ancient History-78% and 70%; Latin-75%; Algebra-74%; foods-82%; Clothing-81%; Music-95% (for four terms) and Gardening-73%.

²⁵This newspaper clipping is part of the Agness Underwood Collection, (will subsequently be referred to as AUC) in the Urban Archives, California State University, Northridge. The only part of the date visible is Wednesday, December (presumably the year was 1917 because the article states she was in the tenth grade). It's interesting to note that Agness is referred to in the introduction as Agnes Ewry, even though she was never officially adopted by her foster family and according to

Mary Evelyn Weed, she used Wilson, the surname of her natural parents, until she married Harry Underwood.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Letter from Mary Evelyn Weed to author, October 27, 1986.

³⁰Majorie Beal, "Boss Lady," Indianapolis Star Magazine, March 5, 1950, p. 16.

³¹Ibid., p. 19.

³²Undated letter from Ralph Ewry to Agness, AUC. Content of the letter states that it was written aboard ship en route to the war zone.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Underwood, Newspaperwoman, pp. 19-20.

³⁵Ibid., p. 20.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Letter from Mary Evelyn Weed to author, April 8, 1986.

³⁸Underwood, Newspaperwoman, pp. 21-22.

³⁹Ibid., p. 21.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³ibid., p. 22.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 23.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 24.

⁴⁹According to an item in Eddie Sherman's column in the Honolulu Advertiser, November 11, 1964, AUC, Agness reunited with Dolly Peterson Jordan in Hawaii, 45 years after the park bench incident, and reminisced about old times. This incident is typical of the way Agness kept in contact with people who touched her life.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 25.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 16.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 25.

⁵⁶Ibid., pp. 25-26.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 26.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 26.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 26-27.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Underwood's first name is spelled with only one "s" on her marriage certificate dated April 28, 1920, contained in AUC.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 27.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 28.

⁶⁷Wedding book contained in AUC.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹ibid.

⁷⁰Ibid., pp. 28-29.

⁷¹Letter from Ralph Ewry to Agness Underwood, September 14, 1921, AUC.

⁷²Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 29.

⁷³Baby book contained in AUC.

⁷⁴Letter from Leona to Agness, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, December 26, 1921, AUC.

⁷⁵Letter from Mary Evelyn Weed to author, October 26, 1986.

⁷⁶Undated letter from Foster Goss presumably written to suggest liner notes for Newspaperwoman, AUC.

⁷⁷Greg Ripee, "Underwood, a Pioneer Woman City Editor, Dies," Daily News, (Los Angeles), July 4, 1984, p. 3.

⁷⁸Letter from Mary Evelyn Weed to author, June 19, 1986.

⁷⁹Interview with Jack Smith, March 7, 1985.

CHAPTER V

BREAKING INTO JOURNALISM

After Underwood retired, she reminisced with a reporter about her first encounter with a newspaper city room, laughing about how her first visit was nearly her last. Although she told the story in a slightly different way in her autobiography and said the events occurred after she already had worked at the Los Angeles Record for a few months, the anecdote still illustrates how she became initiated into the ways of her future profession.

Standing in the middle of the open, loftlike city room that was a clutter of beaten up typewriters, piles of papers and raucous reporters racing about,¹ she knew she'd come a long way from Indiana: "A wild-eyed, bearded man wrapped in a toga made out of a bedsheet ran in, blew a blast on a beat-up trumpet, and shouted 'Repent! Repent now and be saved!'"²

As she watched with disbelief, she noticed that hardly anyone else was paying any attention to the goings-on. Some reporters, engrossed in their stories, never bothered to look up. Several others downed some of the

ever-present liquor and started playing football, first with a telephone book and then with a spittoon. To her amazement, as they were shouting and banging into desks, a policeman came in and joined the game as referee, blowing his whistle to officiate and finally firing his service revolver into the ceiling to signal the end of the game.³

Little did she know that that kind of madness was ahead of her when she arrived for her first day of work as a temporary switchboard operator at the Record in the fall of 1926. She only knew that, for a few weeks at least, she would be earning money her family desperately needed--her own money, to be used as she saw fit. With that in mind, she walked into 612 Wall Street, the old square brick building with the plate glass windows and worn wooden floors that housed the Los Angeles Record. The newspaper, established in 1895, was affectionately dubbed the "old Record" because it was one of the oldest newspapers in the city. Its circulation was smaller than either Harry Chandler's Los Angeles Times or William Randolph Hearst's Los Angeles Examiner, the two large morning papers of the day. And although it operated with a minuscule staff of reporters, it printed an afternoon edition on pink paper every day but Sunday. According to Coy Watson, a veteran Los Angeles news photographer, it had a good reputation and prided itself on getting the truth quickly. He elaborated, "It was supposed to be the image that you saw in a lot of movies where it was a real truth newspaper--this is it, we

don't show any political partiality."⁴

The atmosphere at the Record was chaotic and when she began working at the switchboard, she became part of the madhouse. Stationed in a drafty spot at the head of the stairs on the second floor of the dusty building, she stepped in as the sole operator of an exceedingly busy switchboard. As she tried to keep pace with the calls that poured in, reporters yelled numbers at her to dial out. When she had an occasional calm moment she liked to look out the windows near her station and watch the Pacific Electric interurban cars rattle, or listen to the clatter of the presses coming from the floor below.⁵

Pay day came and she had cleared \$17.50 a week, even after paying a babysitter \$5 to take care of her children. It was more money than she'd ever made. Working outside her home never for a minute meant that she did not work inside her home too. After work she picked up her children, cooked dinner, washed diapers and did the family laundry. As pleased as she was with her paycheck, she still thought of herself as a housewife. When the temporary job ended, she fully expected to resume her job as full time mother and wife.⁶

But the closer she came to realizing her two-week stint was about to end, the more she understood how much she liked earning extra money. So when the two weeks ended and she was offered an eight-week job at the same salary for stuffing Christmas baskets the Record annually

distributed to the poor, she did not have to think twice before she accepted.⁷

Finding a Mentor

The charitable program was run by the paper's woman's editor Gertrude Price, whose pen name was Cynthia Grey. Almost immediately Price recognized potential in her new recruit and decided to take her under her wing. As Underwood recalled in her autobiography, "On that fall day of 1926, I didn't know that she was to become my mentor and confessor, but she took me, a tyro, and brought out texture and mettle."⁸

Underwood loved working for Price, but resigned herself to the fact that after Christmas her job would be over. The new year brought a surprise, however; Price's mother became ill and because of the extra responsibilities at home, she needed help in the office. She was sufficiently impressed with Underwood to offer her a part-time job and pay her salary out of her own pocket.⁹

At \$5 a week for two hours a day, Underwood could not kid herself into thinking she wanted to go to work solely for the money, especially since her entire salary would go to the babysitter.¹⁰ Whether she knew it or not, she had found a career.

From a financial standpoint, it could not have been easy for Price to go out on a limb for Underwood. The Record was not known for paying its reporters very much and

Underwood later thought Price had "created the job and denied herself to provide a stipend that would bridge me into the profession."¹¹ Underwood did not let her down.

She got to the office promptly at 8 a.m. to answer the phones and readers' letters. She worked hard and always tried to do more than was required of her, while at the same time, trying to improve her skills. She had never learned to type, so whenever she had a free minute she copied stories from the paper. Soon she developed an efficient hunt-and-peck system that would serve her well over the years.¹² She also found herself handling the down-and-outers who regularly roamed into the paper looking for assistance.¹³

Gertrude Price was pleased. She encouraged her protege in each new effort while polishing her rough spots with the fastidiousness of a Henry Higgins. She gently corrected the idiosyncracies of Underwood's grammar that reflected her semi-rural roots, and also showed her how to improve her unsophisticated vocabulary.¹⁴

Underwood was a quick study. Within a few months she was put on the Record's payroll, albeit at the same salary, with her clerical duties expanded. A short time later, she was promoted to four hours a day at \$10 a week and she finally began to feel that she belonged. That is not to say that she still didn't shudder at some of the salty language and decadent behavior that surrounded her. The strict religious upbringing of her childhood remained very

much a part of her life. She attended church regularly, taught Sunday school and, with her husband Harry, supervised a program for young people in her congregation.¹⁵

Beginning a Lifelong Friendship

Before he actually met Underwood in 1927, Coy Watson, who at the time was an usher at the Echo Park Methodist Church, remembered, "I knew she was a good church girl because she played the clarinet in the little church band."¹⁶ Later, when he noticed her coming into church with her husband and two young children, he went over and introduced himself. "As an usher, I just did that and I got to talking with her and I told her that I was interested in photography."¹⁷

In 1927 Watson was only 15 but he was well on his way to becoming a professional photographer. As the oldest nephew of George Watson, one of the pioneer news photographers in Los Angeles, Coy had been trained by his uncle and already was taking pictures of classes in the local public schools and doing his own developing in a small darkroom. To make conversation he asked Underwood what she did, and he remembered that after she told him her husband worked as a soda jerk at the Green Lantern drug store, she said with modest pride, "Well, I work at the Record."¹⁸

Watson vividly remembered her response when he told her about his Uncle George who was the manager of Pacific-

Atlantic Photo, which was located in the Los Angeles Times building. He said,

This lit her fuse, as only Aggie would. Her eyes flew open and she said, 'That's what I'm trying to get into, I'm a telephone operator at the Record and I'm trying to do some reporting, trying to get into being a news reporter, a writer.' In other words, she had her idea of what she wanted to do.¹⁹

Coy Watson believed that when the conversation took place, Underwood had not been at the Record for more than six months.²⁰ As they talked at that first meeting, Watson was charmed by Underwood and her family and he also realized that they were going through some tough financial times. The thought occurred to him that they probably had nowhere to go for lunch, so he invited them back to his house. There were eight children at the time in his family and he knew that four more people would make no difference to his mother, who always had a big roast or a leg of lamb in the oven for Sunday dinner.²¹

After some mild protestations, the Underwoods accepted the invitation and a personal and professional friendship between Underwood and Watson began that lasted a lifetime. Their careers, both merely seeds of what they were to become, would grow simultaneously and cross paths continually over the next few decades while each became a legend in Los Angeles journalism.

The Watsons, to a certain extent, became a surrogate family for Underwood, and her relationship with Coy's

mother Goldie Watson became especially important. Living close to the Watsons made it convenient for Underwood to drop by and visit, which she did frequently. Sometimes she came with her family, but often she arrived on the spur of the moment by herself. Underwood loved the happy, fun-loving atmosphere in the house that was the antithesis of the staid household in which she had grown up. The real drawing card, however, probably was the warmth shown to her by Mrs. Watson, perhaps filling some of the void left by her mother's death.

Coy Watson said that he didn't realize until much later how close the two women had become. In retrospect, he thought Underwood was drawn by his mother's lack of pretension. "She was so down to earth," Watson said of his mother. It's a trait he attributed to Underwood as well. He remembered how important his mother's presence was to Underwood during significant moments in her life. As she grew to prominence as a city editor, Underwood was feted and honored on a regular basis. And Coy recalled that every time someone threw a birthday party or an award dinner for her, she wanted Mrs. Watson to be there.²²

Learning Skills to Build for the Future

At work, friendships were important to Underwood too. Gertrude Price filled the role of friend, teacher and confidante. When Underwood decided that she wanted to become a reporter, Price became her strongest supporter.

She taught Underwood the techniques of news writing, showed her how to improve her journalism skills by rewriting local news stories and patiently helped her fine tune her work. As time went on, she introduced Underwood to a variety of different jobs within the woman's department and her protege responded with an insatiable desire to learn and work hard regardless of the task assigned to her.²³

By spring of 1927, Price felt Underwood was ready to be promoted to a fulltime staff position in the woman's department, primarily covering clubs. Ironically, when she became a reporter, the \$20-a-week salary she received was less money than she had made as a telephone operator. And reporter or not, she filled in at the switchboard whenever they needed her until the day she finally left the Record.²⁴

Money was not the primary benefit of the job and Underwood knew it. "Obscure though I was in that Record post," she said, "I was building for the future."²⁵ The future meant more to her now than supplemental income; it meant a career. Perhaps she knew, even early on, that becoming a reporter would finally give her a sense of identity and a feeling of belonging.

Working Wife and Mother

Despite the fact that Underwood was a devoted mother for her two young children, she was fully committed to her job, putting in at least ten hours a day, six days a week.

She hired a full time housekeeper and admitted that "on work days, it was pretty much a matter of raising a family by telephone."²⁶ As much as she worried about her children's well-being during her absence, she never asked for special privileges at work.²⁷

At home, Mary Evelyn recalled that her childhood was fairly average. She says, "Mother usually spent her weekends cooking, she loved it ... and as younger children we went to the beach or on picnics."²⁸ As busy as Underwood became, Mary Evelyn said, "she was always there for my brother or me."²⁹

While Underwood worked for the Record, even her social life was often intermingled with assignments from work. By covering entertainment or sports attractions she would receive free passes to the event and she and Harry could spend a night out on the town without spending their hard-earned money. Her first assignment happened somewhat accidentally when she asked Stub Nelson, the sports editor who was responsible for nicknaming her "Aggie," for some wrestling-match passes for her husband. He gave them to her on the condition that she cover the match for the sports department.³⁰

At the match, Harry gave her a quick on-the-spot lesson in wrestling terminology and the next day a story with her by-line appeared in the sports section of the Record. She didn't stop there, however. She decided to bone up as much as she could on the subject by interviewing

professional wrestlers. She asked them to demonstrate their techniques and explain some of their strategies to her so she could write about their sport with authority. They obliged and she became a part-time sports reporter--on her own hours.³¹

Some of her most enjoyable moments as a sports reporter were spent covering the midget auto races at the Legion Ascot Speedway near Lincoln Park. In the 1920s automobile racing was a very popular sport and Coy Watson fondly remembers the evenings he spent with the Underwoods at the Speedway.³²

Breaking Into City-side

As the months went by, Underwood was becoming an all-around utility person at the Record. Between reporting assignments, she answered mail, took dictation, worked on the switchboard, sewed loose buttons on reporters' jackets and stuffed the charity baskets at Christmas. All the while she had her eyes on the city room. She wanted to be where the action was--she wanted to be a "real" reporter.³³

As she continued to gather club news, she refused to feel defeated when she saw other women reporters getting assignments from the city desk. Instead, she became more determined that her time would come. She worked harder than ever and gradually began to get assignments from the city desk to rewrite stories called in by other reporters. She also rewrote stories from the morning papers to be used

by the Record in the afternoon.³⁴

Despite her gains, she was frustrated by the speed of her progress. She explained, "I was a Jill-of-all-trades but I was 28, with the odds of age against my becoming the city-side reporter I wanted to be."³⁵

At the time, there was no way she could have known how valuable her long apprenticeship would prove to be. When she took over the city desk of the Los Angeles Herald Express at the age of 49, she knew her trade inside-out and from the ground up--a fact that won her the respect of those who worked for her. Much of that knowledge acquired while she was trying to break into city-side. Through her assignments and self-motivation she had developed a broad range of journalism skills in a variety of departments. She also learned the importance of establishing friendships with co-workers, including those who worked in the "back shop" where the paper was printed. Her friend Coy Watson believed that her rapport with the staff was based on mutual admiration. "If you're working for somebody who knows what they're doing and they know what you're doing, it's fun."³⁶

Her diligence paid off in the short run too. On May 21, 1931, through a bit of luck and ingenuity, Underwood got her first big break in the news department.³⁷ All of the newspapers in town were clamoring to get the scoop on one of the most sensational murder cases that had ever rocked the city.

On the night of May 20, David Clark, a handsome, 33-year-old district attorney who had recently resigned to run for a municipal judgeship, shot and killed a powerful Los Angeles underworld figure, Charlie "The Greywolf" Crawford, and his collaborator, Herbert Spencer, a former city editor of the Los Angeles Evening Express, who had become involved with a political weekly called The Critic of Critics. The shooting took place in Crawford's office on Sunset Boulevard and almost immediately sparked widespread fear and confusion in local political circles. Twenty-four hours later Clark was arrested. As Underwood followed the case's progress through local news accounts, she realized no one had thought to interview the suspect's parents.³⁸

She discussed the omission with Gertrude Price, who suggested that she take her angle to the city desk. Rob Brink, the city editor, gave her the go-ahead and Underwood knew she needed to make the most of the opportunity.

"I began grubbing," she said. "I checked city and telephone directories and was ready to call every Clark in the phone book if necessary."³⁹ For awhile it appeared as though she might have to do just that, when she finally hit pay dirt. Clark's parents lived in nearby Highland Park and they were willing to talk and be photographed. Her exclusive story, "Mrs. Clark Says Son is Innocent," was splashed across the front page of the Record accompanied by a two-column wide byline.⁴⁰ She knew she had made an auspicious debut as a news reporter and the copy reflects

her sense of accomplishment.

Near the top of the piece she noted Mrs. Clark's disdain for publicity. "Before giving even one word of an interview," Underwood wrote, "Mrs. Clark made it quite plain that she 'hated publicity--wasn't used to it and didn't want it"--but she added with one of her rare kindly smiles, 'if it will help David, all right.'"⁴¹

Intentionally or not, Underwood emphasized the importance of her coup. She had given the publicity-shy woman a reason to tell the story to her.

If Mrs. Clark was wary about negative press coverage, the content of Underwood's article reveals that she had nothing to fear. The empathetic tone of the piece was set even as Underwood wrote about Clark's background:

His childhood was the childhood of any normal, happy, healthy American boy, only all through that childhood, David Clark showed more consideration for his parents than the average boy, his parents say.

He was more considerate of their feelings, always wanting to do things to lighten their daily troubles, and ever ready to forsake any of his pleasures if he could in any way help or please them.⁴²

Following the background details, Underwood devoted the rest of her piece to a succession of direct quotes from Mrs. Clark. The last few paragraphs of the article are representative of the mother's sentiments.

"David has had a splendid upbringing, comes from a line of pioneer ancestors--has had every chance we could give him--and I just know he absolutely could not go into a room, and shoot down two men.

"If any man did that--he'd change in some way. Possibly, other people couldn't notice the change, but his mother could notice it, no matter how slight a change it might be.

"There is no change in David I know I could notice it if anything was wrong.⁴³

Because Mrs. Clark's statements were printed uninterrupted and unchallenged by the reporter, the piece seemed to be biased in favor of the defendant. But it is likely that the sympathetic tone of the article had more to do with selling newspapers than it did with trying to establish David Clark's innocence. By letting Mrs. Clark tell her story, Underwood personalized the Clark family for the Record's readers. The Clark's, including David, were characterized as a respectable, law-abiding American family (not unlike many of the families who bought the Record) whose well-ordered life had been thrown into chaos. In an era when sob-sister writing was still in vogue, Underwood was writing what most of the public probably wanted to read.

Developing Sources Through Empathy

A few days later, with the ink barely dry from her first success, Underwood gained access to another important person connected to the Crawford murder case. She explained in her autobiography how Bill Conners, the husband of Underwood's good friend Evelyn, was able to arrange an interview for her with Frankie Spencer, the wife of murder victim Herbert Spencer. Frankie Spencer had

successfully avoided speaking about the case to the press (including her husband's former newspaper, the Los Angeles Express) until Connors, a personal friend of the Spencers, was able to persuade Frankie to talk to Underwood.⁴⁴

Underwood also wrote in her autobiography that she was very proud that her novice status did not prevent her from asking Herb Spencer's widow tough, uncomfortable questions concerning her husband's allegedly shady business dealings.⁴⁵ But she mused that it was neither her pointed questions nor Frankie Spencer's emphatic denials about Herb Spencer's criminal connections that got the story on the front page of the Record. Again it was Underwood's ability to elicit emotion-packed quotes from an interview subject that she thought made the city editor sit up and take notice. As Underwood pointed out in Newspaperwoman the city desk thought the crime angle would sell fewer newspapers than the story of a bereaved widow expressing sympathy for the mother of her husband's assailant.⁴⁶ In the last passage of the article, Underwood quoted Frankie Spencer as saying:

"I tell you I still can't believe Herb's gone, that I won't see him again, won't hear him talk to me--oh, it's almost more than I can bear at times.

"Yet I must make myself believe that it is true, he is really gone. You know out of all of this, there is one person for who my heart aches, Dave Clark's mother."⁴⁷

In case anyone missed the point, Underwood added, "And here pretty Frankie Spencer told of her sympathy for

the mother of the man who has confessed killing her husband."⁴⁸

The story's two-line, eight-column headline, "'Sorry for Dave's Mother,' Says Herb Spencer's Widow," reiterated the sentiment to entice buyers. And for Underwood, the big bold letters signified her arrival as a "real" news reporter.⁴⁹

Her handling of the Spencer story also is interesting because it demonstrates that even early in her career she had developed characteristics that contributed to her strength as a reporter and later as a city editor. She was tough, compassionate and had access to good sources. Coy Watson, when asked to describe what qualities made Underwood so successful in her job, said those three ingredients gave her an edge over many of her peers, both male and female. Male reporters, he said, were generally not adept at empathizing with people during a tragedy and getting them to express their feelings. But he said Underwood gained people's trust and could usually get them to talk about almost anything. She could "put herself in with a feeling that a man reporter would not do."⁵⁰

Nothing that a reporter is only as good as her contacts, Watson said he knew from personal experience that Underwood had a knack for developing sources for stories among friends and acquaintances long before she broke into the news department. While she was still working in the woman's department, Underwood would often go out to the

Watsons' home, especially near a holiday or when news was slow, with Record photographer Cliff Wesselman and use one of the Watson children for feature material for the newspaper. Watson recalls her setting up one of his brothers doing a gag with a firecracker for the 4th of July and he particularly remembers a feature that she wrote about his entire family.⁵¹

In that feature, she described the Watsons as "probably one of the largest moving picture families in existence."⁵² Coy Watson, Sr., the father was a well-known visual effects technician and all eight of his children were actors who had appeared in many of the most popular films of the day. The story was given a prominent spot on the front page of the second section. The writing was lively and was accompanied by a photograph of the attractive and healthy-looking Watson children. It must have made interesting reading in a town where more than one mother dreamed of getting her children on the silver screen.

A Comic Opera

After making a big splash with her coverage on the Dave Clark case, Underwood increasingly got news assignments. In the summer of 1931, she was sent to interview Minnie "Ma" Kennedy, the mother of flamboyant Los Angeles evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson. Kennedy had married Reverend G.E. Hudson in Longview, Washington, on

June 28 and the couple had returned to Southern California for their honeymoon.⁵³ The assignment could have been just a one-shot news item about the marriage of one of the city's more colorful people if not for the fact that shortly after the marriage was reported in the press, two other women claimed that "Ma" Kennedy's new husband was already married to them.⁵⁴

When Hudson's alleged bigamy became public knowledge, he immediately disappeared. Minnie Kennedy also went into hiding, although separately from Hudson. The intrigue of Hudson's past and the couple's disappearance made the story a front page sensation, particularly among Record readers, many of whom belonged to the Angeles Temple--the church founded by Kennedy and McPherson.⁵⁵

In her autobiography, Underwood described the tactics she used to track down the missing Kennedy. The anecdote is interesting not because it reveals any ingenious detective work, but because it illustrates the conflict between Underwood's strict religious upbringing and the new code of ethics she faced as a reporter.

By 1931, Underwood's identity as a newspaperwoman had solidified. After working at the Record for five years, covering stories for virtually every department, she no longer had to dream of becoming a reporter--she was one. And if the puritanical teachings of her childhood made her hesitate over questionable ethics at work, ultimately it was as a newswoman, not as an obedient child, that she made

her decisions. Later in her career, she did not think twice about racing to a crime scene before the police to get evidence that would help her scoop the competition. This kind of "theft" was a common practice of newspapermen of the day, and no doubt was considered one-upmanship more than any kind of serious crime.⁵⁶ But at the time of Minnie Kennedy's disappearance, she recalled, telling a simple lie to get information was an affront to her principles.

According to Underwood, when the Record's headline on July 15, 1931, proclaimed "'What-A-Man' and 'Ma' Gone,"⁵⁷ she had reason to believe that Kennedy was being hidden by a rival newspaper, the Express. She realized that if her suspicions were true, she was on top of another big story. She also knew that the only way to locate Kennedy was by tricking the Express into divulging her whereabouts. She said that she wrestled with her conscience about compromising her ethics until she finally rationalized that the newspaper's readers had a right to the story and it was her obligation to give it to them, even if it meant stretching the truth to do it. With that in mind, she called Chuck Dawson, city editor of the Express, and led him to believe she was a member of the Angeles Temple with an urgent message for Minnie Kennedy. "It wasn't exactly a fib; it was important that Record readers have the news and important to Angeles Temple that the Record not be antagonized."⁵⁸

According to her account, after Dawson gave her the address of the Lankershim Hotel where Kennedy was hiding, it was easy for her to get into the room to see her. Underwood, who had established a good relationship with the evangelist's mother when she had interviewed Kennedy shortly after her wedding, merely knocked on the door, asked for "Mother Kennedy" and the secluded woman let her in.⁵⁹ The story landed on the front page of the Record the next day under a banner headline that read, "'Pa' Kennedy Gone; 'I Know Where He Is,' Says 'Ma.'"⁶⁰

Underwood knew how to win people over. Whether she had an intense interest in her fellow human beings, a calculated plan to develop good news sources, or a little bit of both, she often bent over backwards to develop a rapport with those she interviewed. More often than not, it paid off. As a friend, she gained their trust, and as a reporter she got them to confide in her. She got the story, and by using her own somewhat unorthodox methods, she even learned how to make camera-shy subjects feel relaxed enough to be photographed.

Her first meeting with Minnie Kennedy at the time of the marriage was a case in point. As she recalled in Newspaperwoman, she was there as a reporter but wound up doing a lot more than taking notes:

I ironed the dress in which Mrs. Kennedy had been married, so that it would look fresh when we took pictures of her and Hudson. Then I suggested that she allow me to help fix her hair. Unconsciously, I was learning an invaluable

technique in aiding photogs to get pictures. In the future, this hair-doing enabled me to persuade more than one reluctant woman to pose.⁶¹

Her stories on the off-again, on-again marriage of "'Ma' Kennedy" were filled with the kind of quotes from Kennedy that made good copy. On Hudson's bigamy, Kennedy said, "I wouldn't want a man who couldn't interest other women. He does, but just let those other Janes follow him until they fall down in a heap. They can't have him because he's mine. He's going to stay mine, too."⁶²

The Kennedy-Hudson marriage finally ended in divorce, and when Kennedy got ready to file the papers Underwood quoted her as saying, "My mind was made up twelve hours after our second marriage when Jack developed a gimme complex. This used Hudson business doesn't go so good. Husbands are more expensive than the most expensive lawyer in the world."⁶³

Underwood reminisced later that for both the press and the public "Ma" Kennedy's plight was "comic opera."⁶⁴ There were plenty of jokes about Kennedy's second-hand Hudson being repossessed. But in retrospect, Underwood found the whole episode to be far more pathetic than it was funny.⁶⁵ Indeed, this sentiment seems consistent with her unwillingness throughout her career to ridicule people who were down on their luck. Having been there before, she no doubt saw little humor in the misery of others.

Coy Watson tells an anecdote that he feels typified the sensitivity Underwood had toward maintaining the

dignity of people who were down on their luck. They were each working for different newspapers at the time, he said, when a tip came across the wire service announcing that a Los Angeles resident was discovered to be English royalty. Assigned by their respective desks, Underwood and Watson arrived to cover the story at about the same time, and were somewhat puzzled about the address, which was located in one of the city's poorest neighborhoods. After inquiring at the door of the house, they became even more skeptical when they were told the person that they were seeking lived in a trailer in the back yard.⁶⁶

Watson remembered, "We went around to the trailer and this old guy comes out and steps down out of his trailer and as soon as he spoke we both knew that he was of English blood because of the way he spoke--strictly Ronald Coleman."⁶⁷

After Underwood interviewed him, Watson, who was going to photograph the "new" royalty, asked her where she wanted him to shoot the picture. "'Shoot it over here by the side,'" Watson remembered her telling him, "because she didn't want to show where this poor, old guy was living--alone, strictly alone." And Watson further explained, "I don't believe Aggie would have had one word in that story about that old boy living damn near down to poverty level That's just the kind of person she was."⁶⁸

Financial and Marriage Problems

In the depressed economy of 1931, Underwood was having her own problems keeping afloat financially. Despite her success in the news department, by mid-year her salary at the Record had been slashed in half--to only ten dollars a week. And while her hours were cut to correspond with her decreased salary, she remembered with animosity that she was still expected to complete the same amount of work she had accomplished when she was working full time.⁶⁹

Unable to meet the payments, Agness and Harry lost the house they were buying. These economic pressures were accompanied by other strains on their personal life. A letter written to Agness from Harry, dated August 12, 1931, indicates that marital difficulties had driven them apart during this period. Since there is very little in print about the Underwood's 25-year marriage and subsequent divorce, Harry's letter offers a particularly valuable if brief glimpse into the nature of their relationship. It said in part:

To My Little Sweetheart:

Well darling I am writing this meby [sic] it will help to cheer the one I love, and the one I hope loves me, Dear I am truely [sic] very sorry I have been neglectful of you and allowed you to divide your love elsewhere, but I hold great hopes of winning you back, and have you to love always. How you came into my life 12 years ago and you have brought me much happiness something which I never had, we started our love when were both alone, and lonesome. You had no one, and I had no one, and we sure have had some wonderful times together, our happiness has been the best ... the children, they are ours. You are their mother and I their father less [sic] try to keep together our little family You might want to keep this it will always tell you how much I love you if ever I can not.

Your Pal,
Harry⁷⁰

Despite, or perhaps because of their precarious personal situation, they did not pass up a business opportunity that would make them partners at work as well as at home. Evelyn White, a local newspaperwoman who Understood had met while covering the women's club beat, owned a masthead for a small weekly on the east side of town. She wanted to revive the publication with herself as editor and Underwood as publisher. Although it meant moonlighting after a full day of work, Underwood agreed. And Harry, believing that he had little left to lose, gave up his job as a soda fountain manager to become the newspaper's advertising director.⁷¹

Underwood had scant, if any, hands-on experience with the production end of running a newspaper. But again, her apprenticeship as the Record's Girl Friday stood her in good stead. She said, "I applied many of the operations I had observed from the sidelines--writing heads, dummyping pages and layouts, gauging pictures for engravings, and making up over the stone in the composing room."⁷²

The Underwoods offset any lack of knowledge about publishing with a confidence in their own abilities and capacity for hard work. They worked seven days a week, often around the clock.⁷³ On Friday, December 4, 1931, the East Los Angeles Guardian ("The voice of the People") made its debut at five cents per copy.⁷⁴

The eight-column banner headline on the front page, "Local Clubwomen Give Benefit Party Tonight At Strand," clearly demonstrates the newspaper's community orientation. The policy statement in the bottom right-hand corner verifies this. It emphasizes the Guardian's role as the voice of the east side, a forum for community opinion, a booster for community projects and a place to find local news, features and advertising. The last sentence indicates that Underwood or Evelyn White, whoever wrote the policy statement, had a penchant for word games. "Our motto for the near future will be 'Knock the 'die' out of De-press-i-on--and let's all Press on.'"75

A boxed statement in the bottom left-side corner of the front page also is interesting because the writer, Dr. Geo. R. Hartshorn, in his welcoming piece to the Guardian made it sound as if Underwood had given up metropolitan news reporting to concentrate on a career at a community newspaper. He wrote, "The present owner of the Guardian, Agness Underwood, that brilliant young newspaperwoman, was influenced to choose this locality as the field for her future newspaper endeavors."76 However, since there is nothing to indicate that Underwood ever considered giving up her job on the Record, her involvement on the Guardian (despite her title and the amount of time she spent) was no doubt only meant to supplement, rather than replace, her career as an urban news reporter.

In any event, her job as a newspaper publisher lasted

less than a year. The economy was not conducive to new business endeavors and, according to Underwood's account in Newspaperwoman, a brush with the underworld sealed the Guardian's fate.

While we scrambled for ads and to collect money so we could pay bills, Miss White and I were called to a meeting which we thought signaled a bona fide community undertaking. We were amazed to find ourselves sitting in a conference which aimed to organize the vast east Los Angeles area into ten districts for vice and gambling. We said no--decisively.

The Underwoods' brief foray into newspaper publishing did not do much to fill their empty coffers but it did leave a lasting impact on their lives. For Harry, it meant leaving the world of sodas and sandwiches behind and realizing his potential in the more lucrative sales field. Shortly after the Guardian folded, he became an insurance salesman; later he sold automobiles and eventually he became the owner of one of the largest car dealerships in the city.⁷⁷

For Underwood, the experience affected her future in a variety of ways, directly and indirectly. In her autobiography she credits her stint on the weekly with providing her with numerous news sources which proved to be valuable over the years.⁷⁸ Just as importantly, she gained invaluable production knowledge and management skills. It might have been her reputation as a reporter that made her a good candidate for the city editorship, but one key reason she lasted 17 years in a job that none of her

predecessors held for more than four⁷⁹ was that she was able to manage her staff gain their respect. And she gained their respect by knowing her business--from the backshop to the reporters' beats.

"I Am Not A Feminist"

The wisdom that comes with hindsight, however, eluded her in 1932. With the Guardian's demise, Underwood, who had just turned thirty, wanted to focus all of her energy on establishing herself as a newspaperwoman. She felt time was slipping away and the frustration of being relegated to a part-time position by a boss who stifled her actions was a depressant to both her drive and her ego. Although she got few choice news assignments, she continued to cover stories for whatever section needed her.

One of the more interesting projects she undertook was writing a series of articles under the collective title, "Women Who Wait." An introduction described the articles as "a series of interviews with wives and mothers of interesting men ... [whose] ... love made their husbands' success possible and keeps the home going smoothly and happily."⁸⁰ But the content of these articles reveals that not all of the women Underwood chose to interview were homemakers in the traditional sense. Several of the women who "waited" for their men had full time careers.

Whether or not Underwood intended to comment on the

propriety of women working outside the home, the articles seem to imply that it was fine (maybe even therapeutic) for women to work as long as they took care of their men and households first. One of the women, Gertrude Chapman, aviator, secretary and wife of a pilot, was quoted as saying, "'If I didn't have my work, I'd probably worry myself sick like other wives who stay at home.'"81 Her comment was followed by her positive feelings toward the value of performing wifely duties. "When I'm home, waiting for him, I have to keep myself busy every minute, dusting, washing dishes, and doing other little jobs."82 Lorena Thorup, a nurse who was interviewed for another article in the series, expressed nearly the same sentiments about the importance of her job, but the last sentence in the story told the reader that she has not neglected her domestic obligations to become a career woman. "When Mrs. Thorup isn't on duty, she's busy keeping a happy home for her new husband."83

Interestingly, 17 years later, when Underwood's autobiography was published it contained a similar sentiment. "I am no feminist," she stated flatly in the opening sentence of the book. "If I were asked what I regard as the woman's place, I'd probably give the old-fashioned answer: In the home." To emphasize the point she explained, "City Editor or not, I still do my cooking, washing and ironing when I get home."84

Because Newspaperwoman was ghostwritten by a man⁸⁵ it

would be easy to assume that the anti-feminist stance was not her own. But a more likely explanation of her position is that she had an intuitive sense of public relations. By acknowledging her traditional role as homemaker, she did not offend her female readers who were housewives by demeaning their work and she did not threaten her male readers and colleagues by assuming a strong feminist position.

Victories on the Front Page and Behind the Scenes

As 1932 drew to a close, work, not home, was commanding the bulk of Underwood's time, and once again her prospects began to improve. The November elections signaled a change for the country when President-elect Franklin Roosevelt promised to lead the nation out of the depression. Closer to home, politics were having an effect on the Record, too.

The paper was part of the Seattle-based Scripps-Canfield newspaper chain and run locally by Henry Berdice Richmond Briggs, who was known as the antithesis of a "yes-man." One publication of the day described him as "a stony individual who inspired the confidence of his colleagues by being a square shooter and a hater of all that is hypocritical."⁸⁶ Until the unexpected death of B.H. Canfield, chairman of the board of Scripps-Canfield, Briggs was assistant chairman of the board, which gave him an added measure of authority in the newspaper's affairs.⁸⁷

After Canfield's death, his grandson, E.W. Scripps, took over the chain and began to reorganize personnel, placing his Seattle cronies in key positions. From the beginning there was no love lost between Briggs and the young Scripps. Briggs was used to giving orders, not taking them. When Scripps wanted to move him to a newspaper in the Pacific-Northwest, he was incensed--he considered the Record his home. But the threat of a transfer did not discourage him from going full force ahead with an editorial campaign on behalf of senatorial candidate William McAdoo.⁸⁸

On Saturday, November 5, Briggs wrote a glowing editorial praising McAdoo while denouncing his opponents, conservative minister Robert P. Shuler and Tallant Tubbs. On the top of his copy he left the directions: "'Page one--Must for Monday's first edition.'" And he went home."⁸⁹

The first edition, which went to press at 9:00 a.m. Monday, ran the pro-McAdoo endorsement as planned. About ten minutes later, Scripps arrived at the Record and started shaking things up. Before the morning was over the newspaper's editorial position had undergone a 180 degree turn. The headline on the evening extra read, "The Record is for Bob Shuler."⁹⁰ Briggs left in disgust, taking much of the staff with him.⁹¹

With most of the Old Guard gone, Scripps installed a new editor, Jim Marshall. Before coming to the Record, Marshall had been a columnist and editor of the Scripps-

Canfield Syndicate.⁹² He was familiar with Underwood's work and according to her he was appalled to find that she was being under-utilized and underpaid. He immediately reinstated her full-time status and doubled her pay to \$22.50 a week.⁹³ In the meantime, the Record's former editor and Underwood's nemesis, Gilbert Brown, was demoted to reporter and was seen the day after the takeover being ordered to do mundane paste-up chores.⁹⁴

By December the story making the biggest headlines was the Walter Wanderwell murder case. Captain Wanderwell was killed on his boat in Long Beach under suspicious circumstances and the prime suspect was a young, former member of Wanderwell's crew named William "Curly" Guy.⁹⁵

As soon as Guy was captured, Marshall gave Underwood and the demoted Brown the assignment of getting an interview with him. Before sending them to Long Beach where Guy was being held, he gave Underwood \$3 in expense money, an unprecedented amount in those days. It was subtle message from the editor that she was considered the reporter in charge.⁹⁶

Marshall's confidence was well placed. While other reporters, including her antagonistic partner, tried to get in to see Guy by barging past each other and bullying the local police, Underwood tried another tactic. Describing the incident in her autobiography, she said the experience taught her how to make "legitimate deals" with police, especially those in the suburbs. Treating the officers

with respect rather than with metropolitan superiority, she smooth-talked her way into Guy's cell by telling the officer in charge that she only needed a few biographical facts--nothing that would hinder their investigation.⁹⁷

The officer gave in. And when Underwood began to ask Guy questions, he opened up and gave her his whole life story. She phoned it in and by the time she was en route back to Los Angeles with the empty-handed Brown and a photographer, her exclusive had hit the newsstands. She was back on the front page and too pleased to gloat over her coup.⁹⁸

Final Years at the Record

On March 10, 1933, Underwood was riding home from work on the streetcar when she felt the ground shake. She knew her work day was far from over, especially when she walked in the door of her house and saw broken dishes lying all over the floor. After several futile attempts to get through downed and overloaded phone lines, she finally reached the paper and was told that the source of the destructive tremor was a massive earthquake centered in Long Beach. Leaving Mary Evelyn with her housekeeper, she piled 7-year-old son George, who refused to miss the action, into the family car and enlisted her husband to drive them to the scene of the disaster.⁹⁹

The following day an account of her experience appeared as a United Press story, identifying her in the

byline as Agnes [sic] Underwood, United Press Special Correspondent. The article's introduction described her as a "girl reporter" who worked throughout the night to get the story for United Press.¹⁰⁰

The article focused on the part southern California women played in the volunteer rescue efforts following the earthquake. It lauded their bravery, selflessness and efficiency. The nature of the catastrophe allowed Underwood to be a news reporter, a sob sister and a commentator, all in a one-column story. She reported the births of two "earthquake" babies and emotionally wrote of a mother's unsuccessful search for her missing 3-year-old son. But one of the most interesting aspects of the piece, as its headline suggests--"Girl Writer Mixes Work and Rescue"--is that Underwood made herself an integral part of the story.¹⁰¹

The article began in typical third-person news story format, but within a few paragraphs, Underwood began writing in the first person, detailing her own participation in the rescue operations.

Homeless, destitute, grief-stricken and even hungry, the women of southern California today joined forces with doctors, nurses and relief organizations to aid in every possible way to alleviate the misery endured by the thousands of earthquake victims.

Food was distributed at the refugee camps within three hours after the first severe quake.

I helped mothers hunt for missing children.

I helped Mrs[sic] Elfa Weers search for her 15-year-old crippled newsboy son, who even yet is missing. But she isn't hysterical. Her grief is the calm kind--the kind that allows her to work in one of the many

food kitchens being established in the stricken territory.¹⁰²

After the earthquake, Underwood no longer had to beg for prime assignments. Jim Marshall was impressed with her work and continued to give her major stories to cover. As her name began to appear more frequently on the front page, her reputation within the local journalism community grew. By midyear 1933, she was offered a reporting job on Hearst's evening newspaper, the Herald-Express. Admitting in her autobiography that it was a compliment to be invited to join the "big leagues," she nevertheless declined. At the Herald-Express, she would have been expected to provide her own transportation, and at the time she barely knew how to drive. Besides, she was content with the broad range of experience she was getting on a smaller paper. Little did she know at the time how broad that experience would prove to be.¹⁰³

Late on the night of May 14, 1934, after most of the reporters had gone home, William Gettes, the Record's circulation manager, came rushing into the city room. He had just been told by a friend who worked in the United Press office that a little girl, a victim in a sensational kidnapping case, had been found unharmed. He wanted to get out an extra, but as he looked at Underwood and the one other reporter who was still at work, he seriously doubted the possibility.¹⁰⁴

According to Underwood's account in her autobiography, the idea excited her and she didn't hesitate a second before accepting the challenge, even though her bosses had gone home and there was no one in the backshop to print the paper. Rather than spending much time worrying about whether she had bitten off more than she could chew, she immediately sent the other reporter to the United Press office to phone in updates on the story as fast as they came in over the wire.¹⁰⁵

In the meantime, she headed for the Dutchman's Cafe, a favorite hangout for the local press, trying to track down the paper's stereotyper, who she hoped could round up enough linotype operators and compositors to help her get the paper out. Her instincts were right. She spotted the stereotyper and quickly got his promise to get the presses rolling. Then she headed back to her desk to take the dictation phoned in from the reporter at the United Press office.¹⁰⁶

It was a hectic night. In the city room Underwood was a one-woman staff. She found background material and photos. She wrote, edited, headlined and rushed her copy to the composing room as fast as she could slam it out. Just as she was finishing up, she got word that a Beverly Hills oilman named William Gettles, the victim of another kidnapping, had also been found alive. Now the pressure was on to put out an extra with not one, but two major breaking stories. At that point Underwood remembered

thinking "how thankful I was for the experience I had picked up on the ill fated East Los Angeles Guardian."107

When the papers rolled off the press and hit the newsstands, the banner was impossible to miss. Underwood and the men in the back stop decided to use a type size large enough to fit the occasion. Probably with tongues partially in cheek, they chose one called Second Coming which was as ostentatious as its name implied.108

For the next several months Underwood fell back into her normal busy routine of covering everything from news to features while still performing clerical duties when necessary. She was happy with her job and it must have seemed like she would stay with the Record forever. But by early January, two things happened that changed the course of her career. Within days of each other, she received another offer from the Herald-Express and to her astonishment she learned that the Record had been sold to a Los Angeles morning newspaper, The Illustrated Daily News. Rather than taking her chances with new management, she left to work for Hearst.

Conclusions

The time Underwood worked at the Record, from 1926 until 1935, were years of tremendous growth for her, both in terms of career and personal life.

Her goals changed from trying to run an efficient household and passively participating in her family

finances (with ambiguous dreams of some type of success--most likely achieved through her husband) to focusing on building her own career as a reporter and actively participating in her family's finances. One result of her new aspirations was a growing control over her personal life.

Her choice of journalism as a career was also self-inspired. Unlike her choice of a marriage partner or her placement with a foster family, she did not choose her career because it was the lesser of two evils or because it was forced upon her. She chose her career because she fell in love with the idea of becoming a newspaper reporter.

As she became more involved with her job and her identity became linked with her work, her self-esteem grew. Her accomplishments, achieved amidst an atmosphere of camaraderie, pushed the image of an unappreciated orphan further from the front of her mind. She began to view herself in terms of where she was going, rather than dwelling on where she had been.

But because she never forgot her past and the way it felt to be at the bottom, she retained an empathy for others who were down on their luck. She treated people politely and humanely, regardless of their station in life, and her attitude paid off in good stories. Being treated with dignity seemed to make sources, who might otherwise be tight-lipped, open up and give her information they would not reveal to other reporters. Thus, she developed a style

of operating that she was comfortable with. And during an era when scoops and exclusives were a major element of Los Angeles journalism, her ability to bring in exclusive stories gained her respect as a reporter.

Another key factor in Underwood's later success was the solid foundation in the newspaper business she received at the Record with the help of her mentor, Gertrude Price. Clearly, Price was strongly influential and instrumental in establishing Underwood's career. She recognized her potential and painstakingly helped her fulfill it. She taught her necessary skills, encouraged her curiosity and applauded her efforts while showing her how to improve her weak spots. Underwood not only found a patient teacher in Gertrude Price, she also found a mother-figure and a role model. In a way, Underwood began to establish family-type relationships at work that were as strong as the bonds she had in her personal life.

Underwood did not appear to distinguish between personal friendships and professional friendships. Indeed, many of her relationships were both. Certainly in the case of the Watsons she benefited emotionally from her personal relationship with the large, loving family unit. Her inclusion in family dinners and the woman-to-woman talks she had with Mrs. Watson must have contributed to Underwood's sense of security. But the closeness she developed with the family carried over into her professional life. As a novice reporter, she used the

family for feature material in stories and photographs. Later when she worked city-side and the Watson brothers became photographers, they often covered the same stories, albeit for different newspapers. It was a reflection of their feelings toward Underwood that despite the fact that they worked on competing newspapers they would occasionally shoot photographs for her when she was in a pinch. They no doubt thought of her more as family than competition.¹⁰⁹

Her relationships with the Watsons and Price were only a few of the long-term relationships that began during her years at the Record. She established contacts and developed a reputation within the local journalism community. And more importantly, she established news sources on both sides of the law that would prove valuable long after she left to work for Hearst.

CHAPTER V NOTES

- ¹Underwood, Newspaperwoman, pp. 31.
- ²Stan Leppard, Long Beach Independent Press-Telegram, Sunday, August 24, 1980, p. L/S1.
- ³Ibid.
- ⁴Interview with Coy Watson, February 4, 1987.
- ⁵Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 31.
- ⁶Ibid.
- ⁷Ibid., p. 32.
- ⁸Ibid.
- ⁹Ibid., p. 35.
- ¹⁰Ibid.
- ¹¹Ibid.
- ¹²Ibid.
- ¹³Bruce Henstell, "Newspaperwoman Tells All About It," Los Angeles Reader, July 31, 1981, No. 40, p.2.
- ¹⁴Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 36.
- ¹⁵Ibid., p. 39.
- ¹⁶Interview with Coy Watson, February 4, 1987.
- ¹⁷Ibid.
- ¹⁸Ibid.
- ¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰In fact the conversation may have taken place a little later than that. On page 42 of Underwood's autobiography, she states that she didn't attempt any reporting until the Spring of 1927, when she was asked by Gertrude Price to help cover women's clubs for the newspaper. At that time she would have been at the Record a little over a year.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

²³Underwood, Newspaperwoman, pp. 41-42.

²⁴Ibid., p. 42.

²⁵Ibid., p. 43.

²⁶Ibid., p. 43.

²⁷ibid., p. 44.

²⁸Letter from Mary Evelyn Weed to author, June 19, 1986.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 46.

³¹Ibid., p. 47.

³²Interview with Coy Watson, February 4, 1987.

³³Underwood, Newspaperswoman, p. 45.

³⁴Ibid., pp. 44-47.

³⁵ibid., p. 48.

³⁶Interview with Coy Watson, February 4, 1987.

³⁷Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 48.

³⁸Ibid., pp. 48-50; Bruce Henstell, "Newspaperwoman Tells All About It," Los Angeles Reader, July 31, 1981, Vol. 3-No. 40, p. 2; Leppard, Long Beach Independent Press Telegram, August 24, 1980, Section L/S1, P.1.

³⁹Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 50.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Undated clipping from AUC that is clearly the article, "Mrs. Clark Says Son Is Innocent," Los Angeles

Record, that she describes on page 50 of Newspaperwoman as being her first bylined news story.

42Ibid.

43Ibid.

44Underwood, Newspaperwoman, pp. 50-51.

45Ibid.

46Ibid., pp. 52-53.

47Ibid.

48ibid.

49Ibid., pp. 53-54.

50Interview with Coy Watson, February 4, 1987.

51Ibid.

52Agness Underwood, "A Whole Family of Motion Picture Actors," Los Angeles Record, 23 September 1930, sec. 2, p. 1.

53"'Ma and Pa' Kennedy Separate Temporarily," Los Angeles Record, date missing, taken from clipping contained in AUC.

54"Two Women Interested in Husband," Los Angeles Record, 15 July 1931, p. 1.

55Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 55.

56Interview with Jack Smith, March 5, 1985.

57Los Angeles Record, 15 July 1931, p. 1.

58Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 55.

59ibid.

60Los Angeles Record, 16 July 1931, p. 1.

61Ibid., p. 54.

62Los Angeles Record, untitled, undated clipping contained in AUC.

63Underwood, "I'm A Good Loser," Says Ma," Los Angeles Record, undated clipping contained in AUC.

- ⁶⁴Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 57.
- ⁶⁵Ibid.
- ⁶⁶Interview with Coy Watson, February 4, 1987.
- ⁶⁷Ibid.
- ⁶⁸ibid.
- ⁶⁹Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 59.
- ⁷⁰Letter from Harry Underwood to Agness Underwood, August 12, 1931, contained in the AUC.
- ⁷¹Ibid., p. 60.
- ⁷²Ibid.
- ⁷³Ibid.
- ⁷⁴East Los Angeles Guardian, 4 December 1931, p. 1.
- ⁷⁵Ibid.
- ⁷⁶Ibid.
- ⁷⁷Jerry Belcher, "Aggie Underwood, First Woman City Editor of Major Paper Dies," Los Angeles Times, 4 July 1984, Section 2, p. 1.
- ⁷⁸Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 61.
- ⁷⁹Leppard, "Aggie's Torrid Era At the Helm of Paper Bared," p. 1.
- ⁸⁰Agness Underwood, "Women Who Wait," Los Angeles Record, 30 May 1932, sec. 2, p. 1.
- ⁸¹Ibid.
- ⁸²Ibid.
- ⁸³Underwood, "Women Who Wait," (The Aviator's Wife) Los Angeles Record, 2 June 1932, sec. 2, p. 1.
- ⁸⁴Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 1.
- ⁸⁵Newspaperwoman was ghostwritten by her friend and fellow journalist Foster Goss.
- ⁸⁶"Seattle Crew Takes Charge of L.A. Paper," Los Angeles Plain Talk, 14 November 1932, p. 1.

- 87Ibid.
- 88Ibid.
- 89Ibid.
- 90Ibid.
- 91Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 62.
- 92Ibid., p. 63.
- 93Ibid.
- 94"Seattle Crew Takes Charge of L.A. Paper," Los Angeles Plain Talk, 14 November 1932.
- 95Ibid., p. 63.
- 96Ibid., p. 64. The anecdote also is reported in Henstell, "Newspaperwoman Tells All About It," 31 July 1981, p. 2.
- 97Ibid., p. 65.
- 98Ibid.
- 99Ibid., p. 68. The date given for this anecdote in her autobiography is March 11, 1933, but the earthquake actually occurred March 10, 1933.
- 100Ibid.
- 101Underwood, "Girl Writer Mixes Work and Rescue," March 11, 1933.
- 102Ibid.
- 103Ibid., p. 69.
- 104Leppard, "Aggie's Torrid Era at Helm of Paper Bared," p. 1.
- 105Underwood, Newspaper Woman, p. 71.
- 106Ibid. And Leppard, p. 1.
- 107Ibid.
- 108Ibid., p. 72.
- 109Interview with Coy Watson, February 4, 1987.

CHAPTER VI

HEARST REPORTER

In mid-January 1935, Underwood began working at the Herald-Express. It was located in downtown Los Angeles, at Pico and Trenton Streets, in an area populated with newspaper offices and bars and known as "Pico Gulch." (Today it is the site of the Los Angeles Convention Center.)¹ The Herald-Express was Hearst's afternoon paper and, according to former Herald-Express photographer Coy Watson, the paper's slogan, "First with the Latest," was an accurate description of its operation. "The Herald-Express was the fastest-moving newspaper in town--we put out eight editions a day," he recalled.²

True to the tradition of afternoon newspapers, the Herald-Express was a tabloid known for its large photos, bold headlines and racy stories on crime and sex. Its editorial position was right-wing and in line with Hearst's anti-communist and anti-vivisectionist views. It appealed largely to a working class audience and lacked the prestige of Hearst's other Los Angeles newspaper, the morning Examiner.³ Reporters' salaries at the Herald-Express were

generally 50 per cent below their counterparts' at the Examiner, but by the same token, many who worked at the Herald-Express thought reporters on the Examiner were overpaid snobs whose jobs paled in comparison with their own in terms of excitement and camaraderie.⁴

The Examiner and its major competition, Harry Chandler's morning Los Angeles Times, were the city's dominant newspapers during the 1930s. They each had large circulations, big Sunday editions and were the only two papers in town that ran Sunday comics in color.⁵ At the time, the Times, which was losing a circulation battle with the more flamboyant Examiner, was aimed at a middle to upper-income Republican readership. During those Depression years, Chandler's morning newspaper was struggling to find a clear identity and still beat its competition. Politically the Examiner followed the Hearst line (whatever it happened to be at the moment) and depended largely on street sales. Its readership tended to be less affluent than that of the Times and its content more sensational.⁶

However, Gladwyn Hill, a journalist who came to Los Angeles in the late 1930s and worked as Los Angeles correspondent for the New York Times until his retirement in the early 1980s, said the morning papers were generally less flashy than their afternoon counterparts. He explained that the morning dailies had a lot more time to put the paper together and would generally "skim the cream

off the hard news," leaving the afternoon papers the job of embellishing the stories with whatever new angles they could dig up quickly enough to make their deadlines.⁷

According to Hill, there was a real difference between reporters who worked on a morning paper and those who worked for an afternoon one, not in terms of talent but in outlook. He said the afternoon papers tended to go after more of the "gee-whiz" stuff, making the story more sensational than the original. Often there was a friendly but intense competition that was pervasive throughout the business between the morning staffs and the afternoon staffs of the same newspaper to one-up each other. "Everyone scrambled to get something the other guy didn't have," he explained. "But once you knew the other guy didn't have anything you didn't have, you helped each other out."⁸

The Herald-Express had a reputation for being an enjoyable place to work. Practical jokes and liquor were as much a part of the newsroom as typewriters.⁹ But according to Underwood's autobiography, she did not warm up to her new job immediately. At the Record, with its bare bone staff, she had usually covered an assignment alone, except for the assistance of a photographer. Through perserverance and instinct, she had become adept at tracking down stories on her own; her proficiency had become a source of pride and gratification.¹⁰

When she began to work for the Herald-Express as a

general assignment reporter, it took her only a few hours to realize how much more specialized her new job would be. On her first day of work she was assigned to stake out the home of Amelia Earhart to get an interview with the aviator who had completed a solo flight from Hawaii to Oakland, California, the previous day. The wait for Earhart to return home turned into a seven-hour vigil. It was particularly frustrating for Underwood because as only one of several reporters assigned to the story, she was not free to leave her designated location to search for the pilot on her own. It was no consolation knowing that in other parts of the city, other Herald-Express reporters also were waiting in an assigned spot for Earhart's return. She later remembered in her autobiography that the experience made her have very serious doubts about her decision to leave the Record for the Herald-Express. She wrote, "I saw myself as a very little frog in a great big pond."¹¹

Gradually, though, she began to adjust. The pace at the Herald-Express was fast and competitive, which she found both challenging and exciting. A raise in pay to \$30 a week also helped raise her spirits. Her fear of being overwhelmed and stifled by a large news operation was replaced by a deepening respect for the man who hired her, city editor Arthur (Cappy) Marek. In retrospect, she remembered how much Marek allowed her to grow professionally by encouraging her input and giving her the

autonomy to cover stories in her own way.¹²

A few weeks after she began working at the Herald-Express, a fortuitous assignment landed her on a story with a photographer named Perry Fowler. The combination clicked and she began to feel more comfortable on the job. Although they were never officially designated as a team, for the next decade they worked together, covering everything from routine police blotter items and a wide array of general assignment stories to the most sensational local crime cases of the era.¹³

One of the first major stories they covered was the release of "Tiger Girl" Clara Phillips from the women's prison at Tehachapi on June 17, 1935. The case had made major headlines 12 years before when Phillips had been convicted of using a hammer to brutally murder a young widow she suspected of being romantically involved with her husband.¹⁴

Over the years Underwood would cover stories of far greater consequence, but presumably because it was her first big story for the Herald-Express, she devoted several pages in her autobiography to her coverage of Phillips' release. She probably also realized that her experience on the Phillips' story provided an excellent illustration of the way she made her own luck by thinking creatively and working hard. Her account also is important because it was during her work on this story that she came to the attention of John Campbell, who would later appoint her to

be city editor.

In March of 1935, Underwood remembered hearing rumors of Phillips' impending release and knowing immediately the story was going to be of great public interest. Wanting to be the first reporter to get her foot in the door, she went to Marek and talked him into assigning her to do a series of features on the recently built California Institution for Women at Tehachapi, where Phillips was serving her sentence. Once inside the prison, she and Perry Fowler no doubt hoped to get photographs and an exclusive interview with Phillips in addition to the more generalized photographs and feature material about the prison.¹⁵

The copy that evolved out of Underwood's original story idea was a series of articles depicting the lives of women prisoners, including a piece about Clara Phillips. In her autobiography, Underwood described her tactics on the Tehachapi series as an example of keeping her eyes open for stories that could be developed before anyone else thought to do it.¹⁶ By focusing on Phillips more than two months prior to her release date, Underwood got the jump on her colleagues and began to revive readers' interest in a 12-year-old murder case.

Although the idea for the Tehachapi series was a ploy to focus on Phillips, the resulting group of articles was more than just a vehicle to promote news interest in the release of one inmate. The series could not be described as either in-depth or particularly investigative, but it

provided a glimpse of prison life that the public might otherwise not see. It contained highly readable stories updating the lives of other notorious women who were convicted in highly publicized Los Angeles trials, including Nellie Madison, the only California woman at that time to have been sentenced to death; Burmah White, the young wife and convicted accomplice of Thomas White, whose week-long string of violent robberies had terrorized the city during the early 1930s; and Louise Peete, who was convicted in another sensational Los Angeles murder case of the 1920s.¹⁷

The series also came to the attention of editors at other Hearst newspapers. Impressed by her work and anticipating a strong public interest in the material, several other Hearst publications, including the San Francisco Call Bulletin, picked up the series for themselves.¹⁸

The Phillips profile, which was the third article in the series, appeared in the Herald-Express on April 1. It was accompanied by three photographs: one of the attractive Phillips; another of the exterior of her "cottage", which illustrated her seemingly pleasant living quarters that were described in the caption as "cheery little rooms" with no bars or guards; and a third, showing the Los Angeles county jail with a diagram over it showing the route Phillips allegedly took when she escaped shortly after her conviction.¹⁹

The content of the article reveals that although Underwood was able to get enough information to write about Phillips' demeanor and lifestyle during her incarceration, she was not able to get the one thing she probably wanted the most--an exclusive interview with the woman whose story she described in the introduction as "one never-to-be-forgotten in California."²⁰

Even though the headline read, "Clara Phillips Asks Secrecy as Prison Gates to Open," the copy contained no direct quotes from Phillips, only comments from those who were in contact with her, primarily prison matrons. But Underwood managed to piece together a portrait of someone who appeared to have changed considerably while she was institutionalized.²¹

In the opening paragraphs Underwood, referred to Phillips as the "notorious hammer murderess" and characterized her crime as "ghastly." But when she described her "daring escape from the county jail with only 51 cents in her possession, no shoes, only a lavender slip on dress and her subsequent capture in Honduras," the tone seemed to suggest some admiration, however slight. "All of these facts," she wrote, "wove around attractive Clara Phillips an amazing story of daring and crime."²²

As the profile progressed, Underwood used observations from prison personnel to show that Phillips eventually became a compliant inmate and was regarded by the staff as a "model prisoner." She also noted, that for

reasons that no one seemed to understand, as Phillips' release date approached she had become more withdrawn and anti-social, refusing interviews and turning away visitors. Intentionally or not, Underwood had created a little mystery around the woman who was about to be released.

The final paragraph was meant to be the cliff-hanger. "And most important of all," Underwood wrote, "she does not hear from her husband, Armour Phillips--the man for whose love she assertedly hammered to death another woman whom she believed to be receiving a share of his affections. This despite the fact that he vowed to wait for her return."²³ Would Armour Phillips be at the prison gate when his wife was given her freedom? She had baited her readers to find the answer in the Herald-Express on the release date.

Integrating Responsibilities of Work and Family

As Underwood became increasingly involved with work, conflicts inevitably cropped up between her responsibilities on the job and the obligation she felt toward her family and home. In her autobiography, she related two incidents which occurred during the time between the publication of the Tehachapi series and Phillips' release date which provide some insight into the way she dealt with both minor and major discrepancies affecting her as an employed wife and mother.

A few weeks before Phillips was scheduled to be

released, a rumor circulated around the newsroom that she had been secretly paroled ahead of schedule. Determined to find out if they had been outwitted, Underwood and Perry Fowler, without getting approval from the city desk, decided to go to the prison secretly to check things out for themselves. Since they were not on assignment, they had to go on Sunday, their only day off--the one Agness generally reserved for Harry and the children. In deference to her husband, who was getting less and less of her time, she turned the trip into a family outing. She packed a picnic lunch and invited Harry and Fowler's wife to come along.²⁴

Once at Tehachapi, they discovered that the rumor about an early release had been just that, a rumor. Clara Phillips was still very much in prison. Although Underwood was refused permission to see or talk with Phillips personally, a warden Underwood had known previously agreed to hold a conversation with the prisoner within earshot of her and Fowler. By the time they left Tehachapi, they had satisfied their curiosity, gotten some quotes from Phillips (albeit indirectly) and had a nice picnic lunch and Sunday drive with the family.²⁵

But her roles as reporter, wife and mother were sometimes not resolved as easily as packing a picnic lunch. The Friday after her return from Tehachapi, Underwood was involved in an automobile accident which seriously injured her son and left her with minor injuries. After undergoing

emergency surgery, the boy was in critical condition for several days before finally showing some improvement on late Sunday night. A passage from Newspaperwoman shows the home/work conflict Underwood felt, but it also demonstrates that her commitment to work was exceedingly strong. It was this kind of tenacity and disregard for personal vanity that, no doubt, gained her the respect of her colleagues. She wrote: "I went to work Monday although I wanted to be at the hospital. I was sick with anxiety and the bruises and shaking I had suffered. Two black eyes didn't help my outlook."²⁶

The day got worse before it got better. An item about Clara Phillips came over the wire and when Underwood heard about it, she decided that she had better confess to Marek that she had recently been to Tehachapi without first getting his approval. She was not looking forward to his reaction. But as it turned out, going to work that day had positive ramifications for Underwood's future that she could not possibly have anticipated, especially not in connection with her unauthorized prison visit.

When she told Marek about the Tehachapi trip, she fully expected to be chastised for taking the matter into her own hands and not telling anyone about it for over a week. But instead, the city editor called managing editor John B.T. Campbell, who was interested in having the story. At the time, Underwood believed she was too physically and emotionally stressed to do a competent job and relayed her

feelings to Marek. Immediately, she feared reprisals from Campbell, who was notorious for his hot temper. But again she was surprised; Campbell asked only that she give him her notes so that he could write the story himself.²⁷

Later, when he realized that she had come to work despite the trauma going on in her personal life, he apologized for not insisting that she take time off. Underwood remembered that previously he had barely acknowledged her presence.²⁸ It is impossible to know how much this first strong impression contributed to his later decision to make her what probably was the first woman city editor on a major metropolitan newspaper. At the very least, when Underwood came to work with two black eyes, a battered body and a son lying ill in the hospital, he could see that she took her job seriously and was above asking for special privileges. She got his attention. More importantly, she got his respect.

Underwood also was impressed with Campbell's attitude toward her. She had expected anger rather than empathy. But from her account of that period, it appeared that she was equally moved by the generosity of the staff who offered her financial help to cover her son's hospital bills. She told of one reporter, whom she had known only a few months, who offered to give her all of her savings and another who insisted she take an entire month's salary.²⁹

As much as she appreciated the money, it was the motivation behind the offers that must have been most

gratifying. Surely people who gave so generously to her liked and accepted her. She must have started to feel a strong sense of belonging at the Herald-Express. Writing about her employers, she summed it up by saying, "A fair-minded person realizes one had more than a job at stake with fair-minded employers."³⁰ To Underwood, most of her employers and colleagues became family.

By June 17, 1935, when Clara Phillips was released, Underwood's life had calmed considerably. Her son was recuperating and she and Fowler were among the crowd of reporters and photographers at Tehachapi covering the event. The dramatically written copy in Underwood's article played the story for all it was worth. The opening paragraph began:

There was a rasp of keys in locks. Two gates swung open at 7:40 a.m. Through them stepped an oval-faced woman whose brown hair was streaked with grey. [The article was illustrated with a series of photographs which depicted a thin glamorous Phillips as she looked in 1922 juxtaposed next to photographs which showed the pudgier middle-aged woman in 1935].

And Clara Phillips, California's "tiger girl" was freed from her cage today. And like a tigress which has suddenly found freedom, there was a little air of uncertainty about her.

She looked about at the battery of newspaper reporters and photographers as if looking for someone. But the "tiger girl's" mate was not there.³¹

Clearly, at 32, the insecurity and low self-esteem that she felt as a child were still deeply embedded in her consciousness. Seeing her name in print for a major story was a validation of her importance as a person. It was

tangible. She could see it. A scoop was also something her colleagues and competitors could see. Gaining their respect was important to her because it meant a confirmation of her competence as a reporter which in turn strengthened her feelings of her own self-worth.

Establishing a Reputation

Over the next twelve years Underwood would cover more stories for the Herald-Express than she could later remember. As her reputation as a reporter grew, she frequently was referred to as a crime reporter. Although she realized why she was thought of in those terms, she never believed that the designation of "crime reporter" was an appropriate description of what she did--it was far too restrictive. In her autobiography she explained:

For more than a decade before I was assigned to the city desk, I usually was the reporter who spearheaded Mr. Campbell's determination that the Herald-Express be "first with the latest" on these [sensational crime] stories. As a result of my covering criminal cases, various publications have referred to me as a crime reporter. I never regarded myself as one. I was a barnyard kind of general-assignment reporter.³³

Bylined clips from the Herald-Express during that period confirm the description she gave to herself. She covered a broad range of both hard and soft news, including trials, celebrities, floods, fires, government, society, human interest, and even fashion.³⁴ But her sensational crime stories, particularly ones involving murder, were the

attention grabbers--the ones on which her reputation as a tough reporter was built.

In late August 1936, Ruth Muir, a 48-year-old San Diego area secretary from a wealthy Texas family, was found beaten to death in what was described as a "lover's cove" in La Jolla.³⁵ Underwood later described her coverage of the Muir murder as a turning point in her career in terms of recognition from her peers. In her autobiography she wrote, "As I look back, the assignment that probably established my professional standing as a reporter was the 'moonlight murder' of Ruth Muir."³⁶

However, it's interesting to note that when coverage of the murder first appeared in the Herald-Express, there were two articles: the lead story, a full two-column news piece about the murder; and the second, a three-hanky piece about the murder's impact on the victim's elderly parents. Only the second piece carried her byline. The lead story had no byline at all, possibly indicating that Underwood called her notes in to the city room to be written by one or more staff writers.

While the lead story was a fairly straight-forward account of the murder investigation, the piece with Underwood's byline was packed with emotion. The first paragraph began:

An 84-year-old father and a 76-year-old mother, hearts bowed with unspeakable grief, secluded themselves today in a La Jolla Beach cottage over which hung a sign "Happy Hollow."

One month ago, the aged parents arrived, joyous

at a reunion with their only daughter. The daughter they hadn't visited since last year.

Today they are preparing to depart for their San Antonio home--burdened by the greatest tragedy of their lives--the thus far unsolved murder--brutal, undescrivable murder, of the daughter they came to visit.³⁷

On many occasions, Underwood denied ever having been a sob sister, a writer who typically went after angles of a story that were sure to get an emotional response. Being a woman, she may have been especially sensitive to being lumped together with practitioners who were predominantly (although far from exclusively) female when she was trying hard to be perceived on equal terms with her male colleagues. After she had spent years establishing herself as a news reporter, she wanted to be taken seriously. When she heard the sob sister label it must have sounded like an insult. However, it is evident from the above passage, as it is in much of her other writing, that she wanted to provoke the sympathy of the reader. She was not a cool writer; she was a passionate one who relied on emotional manipulation much of the time. She was a serious reporter as well. In her case, the two types of reporting were not necessarily mutually exclusive.

It is not immediately evident from the reportage on the Muir story why this particular assignment might have brought Underwood any more acclaim than the work she had done previously. Nor does she give any reason for it in her autobiography. The reporting appeared to be thorough, but that was nothing new for Underwood. She prided herself

on her reporting skills.

Perhaps it was the fact that the Muir story unfolded like a sleazy detective novel. The first suspect arrested in connection with the murder was a transvestite, which inspired the following copy about the suspect and his residence:

When he was arrested, the man was wearing a woman's brown wig or "transformation."

In a canvas hut where he lived, back of a cafe in the 3800 block in Wilshire boulevard [sic], police found 7 corsets, 11 pairs of women's shoes, 4 girdles, many women's hats, much make-up and powder.³⁸

The following excerpt from the copy also showed the case had implications of possible lesbianism:

Two startling developments caused police to wonder whether the wealthy social worker, a Wellesley college graduate, whose parents said she had not known romance in 25 years, was slain by a woman.

The first was the reported discovery in the laboratory in Pomona College in Claremont that brown hairs she had clutched in her rigid fingers at the cove in La Jolla may have been the hairs of a woman--they were not her own.

The second was the discovery of a bloodstained white rayon slip within 200 feet of where her body was found. It was near an alley back of a garage fronting the beach and Lover's Cove.³⁹

As the case progressed, the police labeled the suspect a "sex maniac," a description that was used liberally in the copy.⁴⁰ It had been quite a story and when Underwood came back to Los Angeles, she was given a \$5 a week raise. She needed the extra income and was grateful to have been rewarded with what was considered at the time

a sizable salary increase. The money, however, was secondary to what the gesture implied. She recalled, "It meant my employers, who were competent to judge, trusted my ability."⁴¹

The following month, Jack Campbell gave her further reason to feel confident about her work. In a special anniversary issue celebrating the Herald-Express' 25th year as an evening daily, he profiled twenty staff members whom he deemed worthy of receiving recognition. Underwood was one of only two women whose profiles were included, and she liked what he wrote about her enough to quote it in her autobiography. Her profile read:

Aggie Underwood should have been a man. A rip-snorting, go-gettun reporter who goes through fire lines, trails killers using anything from airplanes to mules to reach the spot that in newspaper is marked with an arrow or an X. What a gal! Usually followed by one or two photographers who get lost when unable to keep up with this speedy lady. Favorite occupation is following a good murder. Favorite story, a good murder. Favorite phogotrapp, a good murder. Favorite fate for all editors, a good murder. Help!⁴²

It's interesting to compare the profile of Underwood with the profile of the other woman reporter. The contrast between the two provides some insight into how differently Underwood must have been perceived at work from her female colleague. The profile of Caroline Walker said in part:

In everything that Caroline Walker writes there is the earmark of a lady of quality. Sent to the Astor case, she gave the public the one sweet story of that notorious case It takes much of brains and heart and courage to write as Caroline Walker

writes.⁴³

Unlike the Underwood profile, Walker's contained none of the good-natured ribbing that men reserve for their buddies. The Walker profile was a serious but aloof tribute to a "lady." The tone implied respect rather than feelings of camaraderie. The profile emphasized her femininity by referring to her as a lady and describing her writing style as heartfelt. A male reporter's writing would never have been described as "sweet."

Underwood's profile, on the other hand, began by equating her with a man. And the tone used in the rest of the piece suggested a spirit of viewing her as one of the boys. Although it is only one short paragraph, the profile is important because it was one of the first pieces written about Underwood in the press. And the image it portrayed of her to the public was that of a tough, razzle-dazzle crime reporter whose specialty was homicide, not society.

In later years, after she became city editor and particularly after the publication of her autobiography, she would be written about frequently and her public image would expand and become more complex. But the core of her image was right there in that short paragraph. When members of the public thought of Agness Underwood, they thought of a fearless, aggressive, cityside reporter. She was known as a reporter, and later an editor, who could do a "man's job" and do it well.

A Nose for News, a Stomach for Crime

Within the local journalism community, Los Angeles Times columnist Jack Smith remembered, Underwood had a reputation of "being tough in the street and she knew her way around. She didn't take anything off of anybody."⁴⁴

She also acquired legendary status among her colleagues for her calm, clinical response when viewing grizzly homicide scenes. "I was no sissy in control of my reaction to blood and cadavers," she recalled.⁴⁵ An anecdote she told in her autobiography, later repeated in several newspaper articles about her, was used to show that her gender had nothing to do with the strength of her stomach. When she was forbidden by a police officer from entering the scene of a homicide because he thought a woman couldn't handle all the blood that was splattered about, reporter Paul Dorsey quickly remarked, "Don't worry for her. She can take it. Worry for me. Chances are that I can't." Underwood added, "We went in. Paul came out retching and I came out with the pictures."⁴⁶

In her autobiography she pointed out several other examples of her ability to withstand gruesome circumstances more easily than her male counterparts. On one occasion she said she even suspected she was set up just to prove herself.

When actress Thelma Todd died mysteriously and was taken to the morgue, an autopsy was performed. Underwood was egged on by several of her male colleagues to join them

to watch the operation. She agreed. By the time the coroner began removing the star's brain, Underwood said, "Except for the coroner's aides I was alone beside the slab. One by one, cops and reporters had drifted away on what became a stampede to the Hall of Justice rest rooms."⁴⁷

Many years later, long after her retirement, Underwood reflected on her past with a reporter from the community newspaper where she lived. She discussed the coping mechanism that enabled her to deal with the ghastlier aspects of reporting.

She said that it was necessary for her to develop a hardness by building an emotional shield around herself. She explained that although reporters like herself often appeared not to be bothered by unforgettable images, in reality they were. She could never forget being assigned to cover the story of a mother who cut her infant's head off on a bread board.⁴⁸ How could reporters rid themselves of that kind of visual horror? Underwood surmised that there was a direct relationship between reporters' drinking habits and their attempt to block out grim experiences. Although she had not touched alcohol since 1978, she said in the interview that during her reporting days she "drank like a fish--anything."⁴⁹

Solving Crimes

If alcohol took the edge off the gruesome side of her

job, it never dulled her instincts for getting a story. In fact, her intuition was often so sharp that occasionally she solved the crimes she covered before the police did. It was not a matter of one-upmanship on her part, and the police knew it. Although she often disagreed with members of the local police department, she knew it was to their mutual benefit to work together.

"I prefer to get along with cops," Underwood wrote in her autobiography, "and a smart police officer knows how to get along with bonafide reporters and photographers."⁵⁰ Her friend and former employee Stan Leppard said in a piece he wrote about Underwood after her retirement, "She established herself firmly with the police, causing them to try valiantly to overlook her friendship with numerous questionable characters, by helping them solve crimes."⁵¹

An anecdote about a 1939 murder case which was first told in Newspaperwoman and frequently repeated in newspaper articles about Underwood, has become one of the stories used to illustrate the way in which she used her intuition about human nature in sorting out the facts of a story to solve crimes. The case involved Laurel Crawford, a mail carrier, who was found wandering around the mountains near the spot where his car had plunged over a cliff, killing his family of four and a boarder who lived in his house.⁵²

When questioned by police a few hours after the accident, a nearly hysterical Crawford claimed he had lost control of the car and in a panic jumped out just before it

went over the cliff and then frantically tried to climb down the mountain in an attempt to rescue the others. When Underwood arrived to cover the story, she found the police, who were convinced of Crawford's sincerity, doing everything in their power to comfort and console him.⁵³

Underwood was not so quick to offer her sympathy. After noting that Crawford's clothes were barely disheveled or stained, she was convinced that he never seriously attempted to rescue his wife and children, who had been thrown into rugged, dirty terrain. Moreover, his anguish did not ring true. "I know what grief is when I see or hear it," she said. And although she was sure he was dramatizing his situation, not grieving about it, she needed to convince the police, who believed Crawford.⁵⁴

Underwood's daughter recalled that her mother frequently used to say that she "just followed her hunches and it paid off." And in the Crawford case that is exactly what happened. She had a colleague from the Examiner who she thought could pass for a policeman pose as a detective to search Crawford's house. Once inside he found over \$30,000 worth of life insurance policies taken out on the victims of the crash with Crawford's name listed as beneficiary. A motive for the crime was established. A police investigation ensued and Crawford was eventually convicted of murder and sent to San Quentin.⁵⁵

Laurel Crawford was not the first murderer audacious enough to remain at the scene of the crime to arouse

Underwood's suspicions. Three years earlier, a 65-year-old distinguished-looking church organist named Samuel Whittaker had claimed an intruder shot and killed his wife during a burglary attempt in their hotel room. During the investigation, Whittaker professed to be sick with grief. Although the police initially believed him, Underwood almost immediately began to doubt his sincerity. "There was something counterfeit in Whittaker's demeanor," she said later.

When a 21-year-old suspect was arrested, Underwood arranged to have a photograph taken of Whittaker pointing his cane at the holdup man. Whittaker complied, but as he did so, he winked at the suspect. Underwood immediately located one of the detectives working on the case and told him to ask the suspect why Whittaker winked at him. Recalling the incident later, Underwood remembered that although the detective thought she had an "overactive imagination" he grilled the young suspect and discovered that he had been hired by Whittaker to fake a holdup attempt to scare Whittaker's wife into taking better care of her jewelry. When the holdup man arrived at the scene, Whittaker, who was armed, shot and killed his wife and wounded him. Whittaker was arrested, tried and sentenced, but he continued to proclaim his innocence.⁵⁶

After her retirement, Underwood referred to the Whittaker story as one of her favorites, which is probably why it is so often retold in biographical pieces written

about her. Given her reputation for having a terrific sense of humor, it's reasonable to assume that she particularly liked the story's ironic ending. Underwood wrote in her autobiography that after Whittaker's conviction he kept saying that "God would strike him dead if he was guilty of killing his wife. When he was booked into San Quentin, he dropped dead."⁵⁷ It was a black joke, but one that Underwood obviously enjoyed. Aside from the irony of Whittaker's fate, Underwood must have gotten some satisfaction from exposing a liar.

According to her daughter, pretension and phoniness were the traits Underwood disliked the most in people, regardless of their fame or station in life. Mary Evelyn believed the emphasis her mother placed on honesty and loyalty in her relationships encouraged a wide range of people to become sources. "The ones in high places," she said, "were always slipping her information because they respected her as an honest newspaperwoman. The ones that were down and out loved her because she never forgot any of their birthdays, always remembered them all at Xmas, or would give them her last dollars if they needed it."⁵⁸

If it seemed to be a paradox for someone who placed a high priority on honesty to have among her friends and sources several people who had been convicted of crimes, it probably didn't seem hypocritical to Underwood, who reserved a lot of empathy for people who had been given bad breaks in life, as long as they were straight with her.

And her concern for them seemed to be genuine rather than manipulative, although she was certainly smart enough to realize the value of well-placed sources and was savvy enough to nurture those relationships to her advantage while still maintaining journalistic objectivity.

In an interview with a reporter after her retirement, she put the whole matter into perspective:

"I had a miserable childhood and I had been in almost every circumstance the person I interviewed had been in," admits Aggie. "Maybe it was because I could sympathize with them. They confided in me and trusted, but I had to resist getting personally and emotionally involved."⁵⁹

Work and Marriage Conflict

As she became more involved with her job, the relationship with her husband weakened and finally collapsed. In 1943, she and Harry divorced after 23 years of marriage. Although her autobiography was written six years later, she never mentions the divorce in it. It's possible that the omission was a matter of protecting her image--the idea of a divorced career woman might not have been as acceptable to the public as the image of a woman who worked but could maintain her family obligations as well. But it's more likely that the reason for the omission was personal rather than commercial.

Having a family of her own had been an obsession since childhood when she thought of herself as an orphan. When she married Harry, she finally had begun to build a

family that she could call her own. For someone who idealized family life for so long, divorce, at least on some level, had to mean failure.

Although the marriage had been strained at various times during the relationship, Mary Evelyn believed that Underwood never seriously thought Harry would go through with a divorce. She said:

I remember my folks discussing divorce when my father and I were quite young. They called us together and said they were thinking about living separately and we could choose which one we wanted to live with.

I told them I wouldn't live with either of them, I'd go someplace else. My brother cried and said he was going with sister. Divorce was never mentioned again.⁶⁰

Or at least Mary Evelyn never recalled it being mentioned again until both she and her brother had moved out of the house. George joined the navy during World War II and Mary Evelyn got married, leaving Agness and Harry to resolve their conflicts without any interference from them. And the main conflict from Harry's point of view was the time Agness devoted to work. As Mary Evelyn explained:

He didn't mind her being a newspaperwoman at all, he mixed well with them, but it did become a problem as she became more and more involved. She was hardly ever able to make it home for dinner it seemed. Dad wanted her to quit working. It just seems they grew apart after awhile, she had her work and her friends and he had his work [sales manager at an automobile dealership] and his friends. My mother was pretty broken up for awhile because she didn't really think he'd leave.⁶¹

However, if she hesitated when Harry gave her the

ultimatum, "the job or me,"⁶² she probably didn't hesitate long. Being a newspaperwoman was not merely a job for her. It was her identity. It formed the basis of her self-esteem and provided whatever small sense of security she would allow herself to accept. At 41, after years of struggle and hard work, she was finally doing the kind of reporting that gave her satisfaction on a paper for which she was proud to work.

Realistically, even if her feelings for Harry were strong, choosing between him and the job wasn't much of a choice. It would have been next to impossible for her to leave the newspaper in the prime of her career to devote herself exclusively to home and hearth.

In later years, Agness acknowledged the divorce in print, but rarely, if ever, did she discuss it in any detail. However, in interviews that she gave after her retirement, she made passing reference to a separation between Harry and herself when she was asked to elaborate on "the fish story." The anecdote had been told repeatedly in various forms and as one reporter put it, "To newsmen everywhere, about the most famous thing Aggie ever did as a reporter was to hit her city editor in the face with a large, wet deceased fish."⁶³

The incident grew out of an argument Underwood had in early 1940s with her city editor, Lou Young, who had given her a last-minute assignment to work on Christmas Day.⁶⁴ The following is the version of the story she told

to a female reporter from a community newspaper. Perhaps she was a little less guarded in this interview because the publication had only limited circulation, but she mentions a few details--her separation and her drinking--that were missing from other version that have been published:

"My husband and I were separated and I had planned to spend the week-end with my children. The city editor, Lou Young, insisted that I cover that story because there was no one else to do it. After I had rearranged my plans and scheduled the children to spend the time with their father, Lou informed me that another reporter was available.

"I was mad as hell. So after a few drinks with some photogs, I went and got this barracuda I was storing to take home and cook for dinner.

"'Lou, you're a dirty son of a bitch,' I said, and whacked him across the face with the fish. I jumped up on top of the desk and belted him with the fish every time he tried to run around. And then Jack Campbell, the managing editor, came out of his office, and I thought for sure I'd be fired. But instead, he laughed, doubled up, and yelled, 'hit him again, Aggie.'"⁶⁵

Beyond the sheer outrageousness of the act, which immediately made the story good copy, the anecdote provides some insight into Underwood's character, which is probably why it has been included in so many profiles of her. The incident is usually used to point out that even a workaholic who is dedicated to her job can be pushed too far when the demands are unfair. And if Underwood had a reputation for always doing what was asked of her, this anecdote proved that she was no pushover. It also showed her wisdom in tempering anger with a sense of humor. By making her point with a wet fish instead of a whine or

belligerent attitude, she made her bosses laugh and think at the same time, not to mention adding another dimension to her already colorful image.

Conclusions

When Underwood went to work for Hearst she began, in effect, the second phase of her career as a journalist. The Record had been her training ground. It was the place where she learned the newspaper business from the ground up and it was where she established the goals for her future as a reporter. At the Herald-Express, she realized those goals. She also solidified her reputation as one of the city's top local reporters.

Although she received national recognition only after she became city editor, her reporting years may have been the ones she enjoyed the most in terms of personal satisfaction. During interviews she gave after her retirement, the emphasis she placed on anecdotes from that period of time clearly indicated a strong emotional attachment to those days.

For Underwood, who as a child in Indiana craved attention and was always looking for more excitement than her puritanical environment permitted, being a Hearst reporter must have been a little bit like writing her own movie and casting herself in the lead role. On the job she was able to use her sharp mind in a stimulating way and the recognition she received for her work did wonders for her

self-image. She was no longer Agnes Wilson, unappreciated orphan. She was Agness Underwood, ace reporter.

Although she had developed a reputation among the local journalism community as a tough crime reporter, it was probably not until Herald-Express managing editor Jack Campbell wrote a paragraph in the newspaper's anniversary issue equating Underwood with a man and describing her as a "go-gettumm reporter" who loved a good murder story that her image was protected to the public. The brief profile definitely left the impression that although Underwood was a woman, she was accepted as one of the boys. Recognition, especially from someone like Campbell, whom she respected, was a source of pride. It was a validation of her importance.

Although she stated in Newspaperwoman that she considered herself a general assignment reporter, it's clear from the emphasis she placed in her autobiography and subsequent interviews on anecdotes dealing with her coverage of sensational crime stories that she was pleased to be known as a crime reporter. She took her job seriously, from the overly dramatic coverage of Clara Phillips prison release to the "I accuse" photo of Samuel Whittaker. She took sleuthing seriously too. On some level, she must have felt wonderful being able to play cops and robbers as an adult--getting paid for it in both dollars and recognition.

The reporting years seemed to be the headiest of

times for Underwood in every respect except one--the breakup of her marriage. Given her idealized ideas on the importance of family, the divorce was probably a major disappointment. But in terms of her career, the extra time she was able to spend on the job following her divorce in 1943 might have been instrumental in securing her the editorship in 1947. With the number of male reporters gone to fight in the war, her visibility was at an all time high. Although it is impossible to know whether she would have been considered for the position anyway, it is reasonable to assume that her presence, competence and reliability during that time must have made a strong impression on management.

CHAPTER VI NOTES

¹Bruce Henstell, "Newspaperwoman Tells All About It," Los Angeles Reader, 31 July 1981, p. 2.

²Interview with Coy Watson, February 4, 1987.

³Gottlieb and Wolt, p. 287.

⁴Lindsay Chaney and Michael Cieply, The Hearsts, Family and Empire, The Later Years, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), p. 169.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Robert Gottlieb and Irene Wolt, Thinking Big, The Story of the Los Angeles Times, Its Publishers and Their Influence on Southern California, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1977), p. 234. And interview with Coy Watson, February 4, 1987.

⁷Interview with Gladwyn Hill, July 1, 1985.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Chaney and Cieply, The Hearsts, p. 169.

¹⁰Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 75.

¹¹Ibid., p. 76.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid., p. 77, and Henstell, "Newspaperwoman Tells All About It", p. 6.

¹⁴Agness Underwood, "Vanity Still Rules Slayer as She Goes Back Into World," Los Angeles Herald-Express, June 17, 1935, p. 1.

¹⁵Underwood, Newspaperwoman, pp. 82-83.

- ¹⁶Ibid., p. 81.
- ¹⁷Agness Underwood, "145 Women in Tehachapi Prison," Los Angeles Herald-Express, 29 March, 1935, p. 1.
- ¹⁸Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 82.
- ¹⁹Agness, Underwood, "Clara Phillips Asks Secrecy As Prison Gates To Open," Los Angeles Herald-Express, 1 April 1935, pp. 1, 3.
- ²⁰Ibid., p. 3.
- ²¹Ibid.
- ²²Ibid.
- ²³Ibid.
- ²⁴Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 82.
- ²⁵Ibid.
- ²⁶Ibid, p. 84.
- ²⁷Ibid.
- ²⁸Ibid, p. 85.
- ²⁹Ibid, pp. 83-85.
- ³⁰Ibid., p. 85.
- ³¹Agness Underwood, "Vanity Still Rules Slayer As She Goes Back Into World," Los Angeles Herald-Express, 17 June 1935, p. 1.
- ³²Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 86.
- ³³Ibid., p. 103.
- ³⁴AUC.
- ³⁵"New Clue in Y.W.C.A. Secretary Death Found, Mystery Auto Hunted," Los Angeles Herald and Express, 3 September 1936, p. 1.
- ³⁶Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 94.
- ³⁷Agness Underwood, "'Happy Hollow' Turns to Cottage of Tears," Los Angeles Herald-Express, 2 September 1936, p. 1.
- ³⁸"New Clue in Y.W.C.A. Secretary Death Found;

Mystery Auto Hunted," p. 9.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 94.

⁴²John B.T. Campbell, "Headline Hunters of the Herald-Express Are Real Go-Getters," Los Angeles Herald-Express, 27 October 1937, Section C, p. 4.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Interview with Jack Smith, March 3, 1985.

⁴⁵Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 111.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 113.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Carol Hazard, "Pandemonium, Deadlines and Wit," Palos Verdes Peninsula News, 15 January 1981, p. 7.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 107.

⁵¹Leppard, "Aggie's Torrid Era at Helm of Paper Bared," p. 2.

⁵²Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 121.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Underwood, Newspaperwoman, pp. 127-129.

⁵⁷Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 129.

⁵⁸Letter from Mary Evelyn Weed to author, June 19, 1986.

⁵⁹Charles R. Nazarian, "That's Agness with a Double 'S'," Valley News, (Los Angeles), 7 December 1980, p. 5.

⁶⁰Letter from Mary Evelyn Weed to author, March 23, 1987.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Leppard, "Aggie's Torrid Era at Helm of Paper Bared," p. 2.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Hazard, "Pandemonium, Deadlines and Wit," p. 7.

CHAPTER VII

MOVING INTO MANAGEMENT

When Herald-Express Managing Editor Jack Campbell made Underwood city editor in 1947, two national magazines, Time¹ and Newsweek², ran two-column articles in their press sections noting the event as an historic occasion. As far as anyone knew, no other woman had been city editor of a U.S. major metropolitan newspaper. And Jack Campbell was touted as the person responsible for breaking tradition by promoting a female into the previously male bastion of newspaper management. According to Time magazine, the Herald-Express had the largest circulation in the West, making the achievement even more impressive.³

Although a memo from Campbell to his staff indicates that he realized he was breaking new ground by placing a woman in the position, it is also clear from the memo that he made his decision based on Underwood's experience rather than an attempt at tokenism. The memo also is interesting because it reveals that technically the job was considered a co-editorship. No doubt despite Campbell's confidence in

Underwood's ability, he was not one hundred percent sure that a woman could manage the job by herself.

To the staff:

Effective June 23,⁴ we are again going to try the two City Editor plan which worked reasonably smoothly in the Berger-Young regime, with Berger as A.M. City Editor and young as P.M. City Editor.

This time we will try it with Aggie Underwood as A.M. City Editor and Eddie Krauch as P.M. City Editor, Pete Jenkins as Assistant City Editor and George Robert as Picture Editor.

This should work well as I feel sure the staff will give full-hearted cooperation.

Aggie Underwood as[sic] a world of reportorial experience and Eddie Krauch is an expert on pictures and news that goes with them. Pete Jenkins is solid on keeping a balance in stormy moments.

A man and woman team in these executive spots, backed by a safety man, is unusual but follows the trend of the times and as usual the Herald-Express is First with the Latest.

John B.T. Campbell
Managing Editor⁵

By giving Underwood the more prestigious daytime editorship and providing her with a nighttime counterpart, Campbell was able to set a precedent by hiring a woman, yet cover himself with a backup if she failed. The press of the day, made little mention of the fact that Underwood shared the position, probably because it would have diminished the news value of the story to print that Underwood was the first woman to become city editor of a major metropolitan daily--almost.⁶

However, a lot of emphasis was placed on the fact that Underwood had her work cut out for her. Campbell was reputedly a hard boss to please. He needed a competent, trustworthy person at the editor's desk who could work

under pressure, meet his expectations and most importantly, deal with his eccentricities. Underwood once told a reporter that the longest any of her male predecessors had held the job was about four months.⁷ An excerpt from the Time magazine article about her appointment confirms the point:

Hearst's afternoon daily, the Herald-Express, has had a high turnover in city editors. One reason is the managing editor, crusty hard-riding John B.T. Campbell, who used to be a city editor himself and still acts like one, he is a fast man with the pink slip. Managing Editor Campbell has been firing city editors at the rate of two a year; in the process he virtually reduced the job to schedule-shuffling while he bossed the show from a city-room desk. What Campbell needed was somebody who could put up with him, and if need be, talk back to him. In long-suffering trumpet-voiced "Aggie" Underwood he thought he had the man.⁸

In the beginning, Underwood had doubts about accepting the position. According to her daughter, she was amazed when Campbell called her into his office and asked her if she wanted the job. "She was scared and really didn't have any idea if she was capable of doing the work," Mary Evelyn remembered. "I think at the time she still had a bit of an inferiority complex because she was self-educated, having only one year of high school."⁹

She was also well aware that Campbell was supposedly a tyrant to work for and she knew there were rumors and bets among the local journalism community that no woman could handle the job for long--it had broken too many men. But Mary Evelyn said, "These things only made my mother

more determined. She knew she hadn't gotten where she was by being a woman, but by being a damn good newspaperman, as she would say."¹⁰

In fact, it was probably the idea of stepping up to a challenge that made the position seem more palatable to her. Underwood's journalistic ambitions had always been focused on becoming a hard news reporter, not an editor. It could be argued that because there were few women role models in newspaper management at the time, the idea of becoming an editor never occurred to her because it never seemed like a viable possibility. However, the reason she had no aspirations in that direction probably had more to do with the satisfaction she derived from the job she already had. She loved reporting. She relished the excitement of being the person in the street, tracking down leads and being on the scene for a breaking story.

If anything, after twelve years as a general assignment reporter for the Herald-Express, her enthusiasm for the job had intensified. In January of 1947, when Campbell assigned her the job of assistant city editor in addition to her regular reporting duties, she was too busy to think about what the assignment might mean in terms of her career. She was in the midst of investigating one of the most sensational crime stories in Los Angeles history, the brutal murder of a beautiful 22-year old woman named Elizabeth Short who became known as "The Black Dahlia."¹¹

Hearst liked to use tags, she explained in her

autobiography, to identify a case in a seductive manner, often making reference to something floral like "The Red Hibiscus," or the "Orchid Slayings."¹² If a murder had a good name, it would liven up a headline--and headlines were what sold the newspapers out on the street. Among others she took credit for naming the "Lady in Red" murder and the "White Gardenia" murder, but the one for which she is still remembered is the "Black Dahlia." After her retirement she told an interviewer, "There's been a lot of controversy over who named the Black Dahlia. All I know is one of the cops in homicide told me about the name, and I phoned it in to the city editor. The Herald was out that afternoon with it but the Times says it named the case."¹³

When Underwood officially took over the city editor's desk in June 1947, the frustration of no longer being a reporter was a difficult adjustment for her. "The first week or so on the desk," her daughter remembered, "she thought she'd go crazy, because every big story that broke made her want to jump over her desk and go out and cover it. It was hard to assign it and wait for the results."¹⁴

Managing a Staff

Her new job, however, left her little time to reflect on the past. Being in charge of the city desk during an era when there was enormous competition among five newspapers was like being in a pressure cooker. Many years later, she said in an interview:

"A city editor had to have everything in mind. It was particularly bad when there were more newspapers, because you had an editor sitting and reading those newspapers, checking every story, and wanting to know if you had gotten them all. If you missed one or two they'd start chewing you out. The first three months I went home every night and cried myself to sleep."¹⁵

According to her daughter, despite the stress and the frustration, she never seriously thought of giving up. She just drove herself harder to become a good city editor. She believed that if Campbell had enough faith in her to give her the job, she wasn't going to let him down. Mary Evelyn remembered her mother saying, "If he thinks I can do it--I will."¹⁶

She also had the strong support of her staff. Her daughter explained that with the exception of one disgruntled assistant city editor who was passed over for the job, her staff seemed to have complete confidence in her ability to do the job. Mary Evelyn elaborated:

You've never seen a more loyal crew. They all knew that she wasn't asking them to do anything she couldn't do herself and probably better. I think the reporters would have walked through fire to get her a story rather than come back to Aggie and say, "sorry, we blew it."¹⁷

Newspapermen who worked for Underwood also remembered the staff's dedication. Stan Leppard, a reporter who worked for Underwood during the last 1950s and early 1960s, later wrote about her ability to inspire intense loyalty:

She drove her staff relentlessly, but she drove

herself as well. She was at her desk at 3:45 each weekday morning and she stayed there from 12 to 14 hours, never leaving it for breakfast or lunch. Loyalty, for Aggie, was a two-way street. She would fight like a wildcat defending a reporter or photographer who was under fire from an influential subscriber, advertiser, an official or the paper's management, and she almost always won.¹⁸

Jack Smith said he discovered almost immediately that she had a terrific news sense and knew how to motivate reporters to get what she wanted. He remembered:

She was unrelenting in wanting a story and wanting her boys to get pictures and we knew that she was. She'd feel quite let down if you didn't come up with something. She could make you feel as if you disappointed your mother. And the only reward that you got for producing was Aggie's approval and maybe a case of beer at the end of the day. 'Front Page' journalism was still very much alive in Los Angeles.¹⁹

Gladwyn Hill, then the Los Angeles correspondent for the New York Times, also remembered local reporters from that time "going through the motions of the 'Front Page.'" It was almost like they'd been to a whole lot of newspaper movies and were trying to act like that. And coming out here from a fairly sophisticated setting in New York, the picture stealing and the "gee-whiz" stuff seemed oddly anachronistic."²⁰

The type of Ben-Hecht journalism that flourished in Los Angeles in the 1940s and 1950s had long since disappeared on East Coast newspapers. Hill noted that even as far west as Chicago, it had made its last gasp in the late 1930s. In Los Angeles, a city that he said "had the

appearance of modernity but the mentality of a frontier community,"²¹ journalism had not yet become weighted down with respectability.

Reporters, especially Hearst reporters, were often as colorful as the stories they covered. Underwood was no exception and she lost none of her flamboyancy after she accepted the editorship. Leppard gave one example of her dramatic gestures:

When Aggie took over the desk, she laid a baseball bat and a starter's pistol on top of it, and they remained there during her 17-1/2 year tenure. She said the baseball bat was mainly to "scare off persistent press agents;" but it also served as a mute reminder to the staff of the First Commandment of Aggieville: "Don't lie to momma!"²²

She was well aware that she needed to change the staff's perception of her as she made the transition from being their peer to being their boss. As she explained to an interviewer after her retirement, "'I had to be tough and hard, or those men would have taken advantage of me and I would never have gotten any work out of them.'"²³ But by asserting her authority with a bit of panache, she made it clear that she had every intention of having fun along the way. She believed work should be hard but never dull and if it meant shooting a pistol in the air every so often to liven things up, so be it.

The confidence she exhibited outwardly during the first few days hid the anxiety she was feeling inside. She admitted in her autobiography, "I suffered from trepidation

on the first morning I dealt clips to the rewriters and the reporters in the bullpen. I held the clippings for several minutes before I mustered the nerve to hand them out, wondering what the hell I was doing on the city desk."²⁴ However, determination to succeed in a position where so many others had failed took precedence over her fears and she went forward.

Learning on the Job

From the outset she began to develop a highly personal management style based largely on trial and error. "Nobody showed me how to be city editor," she said. The routine was my own, developed as I went along."²⁵

In the beginning, she borrowed techniques from other city editors she had observed. For example, she worked on her feet most of the time because she knew a few city editors who claimed that standing made them work faster. It put her in the midst of the action where she could comfortably shout orders or encouragement to her staff without skipping a beat.²⁶

Maximizing efficiency was a top priority because she was resolved "to disprove expectations that a woman would be too scatterbrained to cope with a fast city desk."²⁷ Although she was a novice at running the city desk, she had been juggling career and family obligations long enough to realize that being organized was the key to handling the diverse responsibilities she faced.

Within the first few weeks, she began to make practical improvements which she hoped would streamline the operation. Unlike her predecessors, who had merely jotted down upcoming events in a notebook, Underwood created a formal bookkeeping system designed to provide a complete overview of assignments--past, current and future--complete with information on deadlines, slug lines, word counts and the names of writers, photographers and rewrite men assigned to each story. It was not well received at first, especially by skeptical reporters who were not used to having such close tabs kept on them.²⁸ As reporter Stan Leppard recalled: "She juggled 40 reporters and 22 photographers ... and she knew where each one was at any hour of the day and what they werre doing. And it had better be good."²⁹

As time went by, everyone, including the reporters, began to see the wisdom of having a written record. It saved time, simplified tracking down stories, made it possible to locate reporters quickly and settled disputes when memories were hazy about details of assignments.³⁰

Even without her notes, Underwood's memory was extraordinary. Those who knew her were constantly amazed by her ability to remember seemingly everything. Leppard recalled:

She had a fantastic knowledge of every section of the city, throw an address at her and she could tell you where it would be in the Thomas street guide without hesitation. And when you called in from out on assignment she could tell you what

bar you were calling from and what the bartender's name was.³¹

If Underwood caused any resentment by making reporters feel like they were constantly under the gun, she compensated for it in other ways. She tolerated a lot of drinking in the newsroom and put up with the eccentricities of what Jack Smith described as "a cityside staff of oddballs," most of whom he said would not be able to hold a job in the staid atmosphere that prevails in journalism today. "Even by the looser standards of that era," he said, "the Herald city room was a circus."³²

Incredibly, he said, they managed to get out not just one, but several, editions of the paper every day on time. "There was a certin chivalry, a camaraderie," said Smith, "that one did it for Aggie."³³ Or as Underwood herself said many years later in an interview, "'We put out one hell of a newspaper and we had a wonderful feeling of comradeship. We were just like one big happy family.'"³⁴

She was supportive of anyone on her staff who had family or financial problems and knew how to make each reporter or photographer who worked for her feel special as an individual. Smith remembered, "She knew everyone's name. She knew your wife's name, she knew how many children you had and she knew eveything about you."³⁵ The result he said, was that "most of them were as loyal to Aggie and as steadfast under fire as soldiers in the old British square."³⁶

According to Smith, amidst the chaos, Underwood and her raucous crew put out a quality newspaper. He said, "Given the kind of [sensational] newspaper it wanted to be, the Herald-Express was a very good paper--terse, fresh, exciting and as accurate as any newspaper or newscast put out under such pressures could be today."³⁷

The public apparently agreed. During Underwood's 17-1/2 year editorship, the newspaper's daily circulation increased from 100,000 to 700,000. When she left the city desk in 1965, the paper, which had merged with Hearst's morning daily to become the Herald Examiner, was the largest afternoon daily in the United States.³⁸ According to her daughter, raising the circulation to its highest peak while she was on the desk was a source of enormous pride for her mother.³⁹

Press Perceptions

Given the choice, Underwood would not have made gender an issue in her career. However, her daughter pointed out that she was enough of a newsperson to know that being a woman in that position was news at the time and she seemed to enjoy the national press attention that came with being the first woman city editor of a major metropolitan daily.

Articles in both Time and Newsweek focused on the uniqueness of Underwood doing a "man's job." Newsweek portrayed her as the antithesis of a sob sister⁴⁰ and Time

tried to explain the phenomenon by playing up the macho side of her character: "Aggie can keep up with the boys at drinking and cussing, and sometimes does." The article went on to quote Bill Kennedy, one of her rewriters, about the idea of working for a woman boss. "Aggie's not a woman," he said. "She's a newspaperman. No one could dare send her flowers on this occasion. She'd throw 'em at whoever did."⁴¹

Kennedy's quote probably pleased her. She often referred to herself as a newspaperman--the masculine term must have given her a feeling of parity. Throughout her career she seemed to identify more with male colleagues than with female ones and it was important to her to be accepted by them. She wanted to be judged on the quality of her work, described in the Time article as "hard, tough and garish,"⁴² and had little, if any, interest in breaking new ground for women, per se, within her profession. She was quoted as saying, "I don't want any advantages because of my sex."⁴³ Like the press of the day, she probably considered her promotion to the city desk an exceptional situation rather than the beginning of a new trend to hire qualified women into management.

The Time article also mentioned Underwood's lack of vanity about her appearance. "Her hair usually looks as though it had been combed by a vacuum cleaner, and her clothes are often baggy."⁴⁴ Presumably the author was pointing out her tendency to think "like a man," but by

focusing on her appearance, he treated her like a woman in print--a male city editor would not likely have been described in that way, even if his hair stood on end and his pants were four sizes too large.

As for Underwood's reaction to the description, her daughter said she had only wished the article explained why she looked that way. Phone systems were very different then, requiring a person to talk into the mouthpiece while holding the earpiece to the ear, unless one did as Underwood did--wear earphones in order to free her hands to do other things. "My mother pulled earphones on and off her head at least 200 or 300 times a day," Mary Evelyn said.⁴⁵ It was not the best way to maintain a perfectly combed hairstyle, but it was an efficient way to get the job done. There was also a practical reason why she wore unstylish clothes, always in black or dark blue, and it had nothing to do with a lack of interest in her appearance. It simply did not make sense to wear high fashion to the office when she would go home with carbon and ink all over her.⁴⁶

An Editor in Practice, A Reporter at Heart

In her autobiography, Underwood said she was determined not to be a reporter after she became city editor because she felt that a person trying to do two jobs simultaneously would not do justice to either one. "Swinging away from the desk to spank a typewriter or hot-

shotting around as a reporter wastes time on a single story while the flow of dozens is being slighted," she explained.⁴⁷

Occasionally, however a story came along which she felt she had no other choice but to cover it herself. When convicted murderer Louise Peete was scheduled to die in the gas chamber at San Quentin, Underwood went to cover the prisoner's final interview with the press at Tehachapi on the eve of her execution. Her reasons for wanting to cover the case herself appear to have been more personal than professional. As a reporter, Underwood had gotten to know Peete quite well during the numerous interviews she conducted with her and she must not have been able to resist covering the story until the end. Although the resulting piece gave the impression from its byline, "Louise Peete As Told to Agness Underwood," that Peete gave Underwood an exclusive interview, the body of the article reveals Underwood was one of several newspeople attending a press conference. In her autobiography she explains that it was impossible to delegate the assignment, but there is nothing in the copy to indicate why that was so.⁴⁸

In the case of Beulah Louise Overell, Underwood decided to get involved when she realized she might be able to do what no other reporter in town had been able to do-- get an interview with the 17-year-old heiress who was accused with her 21-year-old fiancée George (Bud) Gollum of killing her parents on a yacht with a time bomb.⁴⁹ Knowing

that interview requests from several reporters had been turned down, Underwood heard the teenager might talk to a reporter, if the reporter was a woman. It is likely she decided to take the assignment herself because she probably did not have a woman reporter on her staff that she trusted to get the story. At the time, she had very little respect for most other women reporters, whom she often referred to as "girl wonders."⁵⁰

Newspaperman Gladwyn Hill remembered Underwood's work on the Overell case and described it as "one of the highlights of her career" in terms of showing off her talents both as a reporter and an editor. "They really skunked the Times in all developments of that case," he said.⁵¹ Underwood's initial story was labeled "Exclusive" in bold white letters on a black background with the byline, "Beulah L. Overell, As Told to Agness Underwood," also printed in bold white letters on a black background to make it stand out. To underscore the significance of Underwood's coup, the Herald-Express ran a two column photograph next to the story of Underwood seated next to Overell, jotting down interview notes.⁵²

The story was written in a dramatic style typical of many of Underwood's earlier pieces. It began:

Everything since my parents died is a nightmare to me.
Everything seems unreal except Bud. (George Gollum, her fiance.)
Somehow I know that eventually everything is going to be all right, it just has to be.
(As she reached this point in the start of her

story, the ash blond-haired girl thought silently for just a moment as though collecting her thoughts, smiled slightly to herself and then launched into this account of her childhood and relationship with her wealthy parents.)⁵³

Overell admitted to Underwood that she was a pampered but bored child, spoiled by her well-intentioned, wealthy parents who gave in to her every whim. By encouraging Overell to discuss her background, Underwood obviously hoped to provide some clues or insight into why a young woman who had seemingly been given everything she desired would want to kill the very people who gave it to her. During the interview, Overell did not admit guilt, but she did reveal an almost blind passion for her fiance who was her alledged accomplice in the murder. Despite the lack of admissions, the story left the definite impression that love and money could be very strong motives for committing murder.⁵⁴

Although Underwood prided herself on her ability to elicit information from an interview subject, in this case it is clear from a passage in her autobiography that the thrill for her in the Overell story was overcoming obstacles to get an exclusive out on the street under deadline pressures by outsmarting the competition. She wrote:

The first snag came when the lawyer got cold feet about the interview and had to be repersuaded; the second when they refused to promise it to us as an exclusive. The third bad moment was when I was spotted by an Examiner reporter as I was getting away from the jail, after the interview, in the

Herald-Express radio car. We managed to get away-- and then the car phone wouldn't work. However, by telephone from a gas station, I just made the Herald-Express deadline. When the edition hit the street, the other papers were immediately on Jacob's [Overell's lawyer] neck, and later interviews were arranged for all of them. The Herald exclusive ... was gauged important enough to be played on front pages of out-of-town newspapers.⁵⁵

Overell and Gollum were indicted for the murder and when the trial opened, Underwood reluctantly assigned two staff reporters to cover it. She didn't stay in the background long. Through a prison source, Underwood received copies of some incriminating letters written by Overell and Gollum which had been intercepted while they were awaiting trial. She realized the situation was a little sticky, not because she was in possession of correspondence that was obtained under dubious circumstances, but because the contents of her copies of the letters needed to be released at precisely the right time. If she ran them immediately, before the originals had been admitted into evidence, she could be accused of printing privileged information. If she waited too long, she would lose her exclusive.⁵⁶

It was precisely the kind of situation Underwood thrived on. A few hours after the letters became public record, copies of the Herald-Express containing four pages of Overell/Gollum correspondence hit the street. The competition, which had to rely on court copies of the letters, was more than 24 hours behind on the story.⁵⁷

Several years later, she acquired another set of love letters which boosted circulation and made her the envy of almost every other newsperson in town. In April 1958, Cheryl Crane, the daughter of actress Lana Turner, allegedly stabbed to death her mother's lover, Johnny Stompanato, during a violent argument in Turner's kitchen.⁵⁸

The story broke on a weekend, receiving massive coverage in the local press, amid rumors that Stompanato "had been trying to force his attentions on Turner."⁵⁹ Underwood wanted to keep interest in the story alive for at least a few more days and decided to follow a hunch. She called underworld figure Mickey Cohen, a mutual friend of hers and Stompanato's, and asked whether he knew of any correspondence Stompanato might have received from Turner during their stormy relationship. When he answered affirmatively, she asked if he could get it for her. "He was kind of busy himself," she remembered. "He was in court on a trial of some kind. So I had my reporter who was covering that trial contact him in the pressroom and ask about the letters." The next day Stompanato's Wilshire Avenue apartment was broken into and Cohen handed Underwood a stack of torrid love letters⁶⁰ which vindicated Stompanato's honor.⁶¹

After the story broke exclusively in the Herald-Express, it was picked up by other newspapers around the world. In later years, one of the anecdotes Underwood

often told interviewers was about a call she received from Cohen after he gave her the letters. "'Aggie,'" said Cohen, "'Could I just have one or two of those letters back? The Examiner is raising hell.'"62

Life in the City Room

Underwood loved a good laugh as much as she loved a sensational story and she became notorious for playing elaborate practical jokes on her staff. Stan Leppard gave an example of one of the pranks she pulled on Tony Gentle, a financial editor who worked at the at the Herald-Express during the early 1950s and who had the habit of leering at beautiful women dressed in scanty attire:

One day an especially curvy lady came undulating in and Tony, responding to the familiar shout, came rushing out. The lady walked right by the city desk and right up to Tony, pulling strings as she walked, and her clothes started falling off.

Tony backed up in a great confusion and collapsed weakly in a rewriter's chair as the lady kept approaching, getting bare and barer with every step. She finally curled up in Tony's lap, clad in nothing but a G-string, while photographers popped out to record the tableaux.

The lady, it turned out, was a nightclub stripper Aggie had recruited for the event. The stripper happily joined the impromptu office party that followed.⁶³

Discounting the unlikely possibility that Underwood staged the incident to embarrass a colleague into changing his ways, the anecdote provides another illustration of why Underwood was readily accepted by her male colleagues. Hiring a femal stripper was something males, not females,

typically did for party entertainment. But it did not seem out of character for Underwood, who understood and shared her male colleagues' sense of humor.

No one at the Herald-Express was immune to her mischief, including the top brass. When George Hearst, Jr., who had been the business manager of the newspaper, was made publisher, a party was given in his honor. Underwood decided to liven things up. She crept up behind Hearst with a big, empty champagne bottle and cried out that it was time for a christening, as she shattered the bottle on his head.⁶⁴

At first, Hearst was too horrified to realize that he had only been struck with a spun-sugar "breakaway" bottle which Underwood had gotten from a movie studio props department. But Underwood was not finished with him. A few days later, she read a story about an actor who had been seriously injured from a defective breakaway bottle and she couldn't resist the opportunity for a little black humor. She sent the article to Hearst with a note attached: "Come on back and let's try it again. Maybe we can get it to work this time."⁶⁵

Several file cabinets at the Herald-Express were always filled with liquor in case there was an impromptu party. Almost any excuse, large or small, prompted a celebration. One reporter had his wedding in the city room because Underwood persuaded him that the only way the entire staff would be able to attend his wedding would be

if he got married at work. On another occasion the mayor was brought in for a ribbon cutting ceremony, celebrities provided entertainment and bellydancers wiggled on top of desks and in the aisles. The reason for all the festivity--the men's room had just been painted.⁶⁶

The antics in the city room lasted throughout most of Underwood's editorship, but in the early 1960s the atmosphere began to change. An era was coming to an end.

A Two-Paper Town

When Underwood became city editor in 1947, the postwar economy in Los Angeles was strong enough to support four daily newspapers--the Herald-Express, the Examiner, the Times and the Daily News, a liberal paper oriented toward a working class readership.⁶⁷ In 1948, a fifth paper, The Los Angeles Mirror, was established by the Chandlers in an attempt to compete directly with the Herald-Express for the lower class, less educated audience in the afternoon.⁶⁸

The Mirror was never financially successful. Unlike Campbell and Underwood, most of the Mirror's management team were outsiders who were unfamiliar with the city. Publisher Virgil Pinkley had been a former United Press bureau chief in Europe and managing editor Ed Murray had been a United Press manager in Italy. They tried to create a "brash and irreverent 'hot tabloid'" but, according to one critic at the time, "'it was never anything but a

Republican paper in spite of what it pretended.'"69 The majority of Herald-Express readers remained loyal to the familiar Hearst formula of sensational stories and large photographs.70

By 1958, the Mirror was averaging a loss of nearly \$2 million per year. The Chandlers began to consider their various options. These included simply closing the Mirror, merging the Times and Mirror into an all-day newspaper, or retaining the Mirror as a tax shelter in order to hurt Hearst's circulation enough to force a merger between the Examiner and the Herald-Express.71

Finally the Chandlers decided it was in their best interests to close the Mirror if they could convince the Hearst organization to shut down its more profitable local paper, the Examiner, at the same time.72 In 1959 Norman Chandler wrote a letter to Hap Kern, then general manager of the Hearst newspapers, proposing that the Examiner "discontinue publication in the daily morning field and the Mirror do likewise in the evening.'"73

After analyzing circulation figures, advertising data and other criteria, Hearst management concluded that the proposal was heavily weighted in the Chandlers' favor. The morning papers received the bulk of the advertising and had the most prestige. But more importantly, the Examiner was making a \$1 million profit in 1959 and the Herald-Express was losing \$950,000.74 It was clearly a bad deal for Hearst and they rejected the proposal.75

A year later, however, Hearst began to realize that Los Angeles could no longer support four newspapers. The only question was which one was going to go and under what circumstances. They decided to reopen negotiations with the Chandler organization and casually mentioned they might be willing to reconsider an exclusive morning-evening division. The Chandlers, skeptical of the Hearst organization's change of heart, ordered an analysis to study what the ramifications of that type of split could be. Like the Hearst analysis the year before, a report prepared in 1960 by Times treasurer Milton Day concluded that the deal was far more advantageous for the Chandlers. It further projected that it would "place the Times in such a dominant position that both the evening and Sunday Hearst papers would be in a very difficult competitive position."⁷⁶

After reading the report, the Chandlers were even more puzzled. They suspected the Hearst organization had something up its sleeve and attempted to persuade it to sell the Herald-Express instead. They offered the Hearst organization \$5 million, but it had no intention of selling its evening paper to the Chandlers because it would mean the Times Mirror Company would have a strong paper in the morning and a monopoly in the evening. In such a situation the Examiner would eventually be squeezed out of existence. Ironically, the Chandlers' lack of interest in the exclusive morning/evening division convinced the Hearst

management that the arrangement might be good for them.⁷⁷

Two other factors also influenced their thinking. In 1960, the Herald-Express was increasing its lead over the Mirror in terms of circulation and advertising dollars, while the Examiner was losing ground to the Times. More importantly, the Examiner, which had made \$1 million in 1959, showed a loss of \$654,000 in 1960. It was the most drastic one-year profits decline in the history of Hearst's Los Angeles newspapers. Unlike two years before, when giving up the Examiner would have meant that the Hearst organization would relinquish a profitable business while the Chandlers gave up a losing business, now it appeared as though both organizations would be giving up losing businesses.⁷⁸

The negotiations continued. In the fall of 1961 both sides agreed to the exclusive morning/evening arrangement, pending the elimination of one major obstacle--folding the Mirror and the Examiner simultaneously was likely a violation of anti-trust law, which prevents companies from eliminating competition.⁷⁹

On October 19, 1961, Hearst attorney James McInerney wrote to Attorney General Robert Kennedy arguing that the Mirror and the Examiner should be exempt from anti-trust regulations because they were both "failing corporations." A few weeks later, McInerney was told by the Justice Department that it could not approve his request.⁸⁰

McInerney then went to Washington and met with Lee

Loevinger, an attorney with the anti-trust division of the Justice Department. McInerney again presented his argument, but Loevinger wasn't convinced of its merit. He countered that both parties appeared to be protecting themselves from the possibility of another company purchasing their financially-troubled businesses and providing competition. McInerney pleaded that Hearst would lose millions of dollars if he could not get permission to shut down immediately. Then Loevinger casually mentioned that there was nothing in the anti-trust law to prevent a corporation from simply dropping an unsuccessful venture. McInerney interpreted the offhand comment as tacit approval.⁸¹

A month later, on December 26, 1961, the Times Mirror board of director approved the plan to simultaneously close the Mirror and the Examiner. And on January 7, 1962, the two newspapers stopped publication, putting fourteen hundred employees out of work, four hundred at the Mirror and one thousand at the Examiner.⁸²

An announcement in the Examiner offered the following explanation for its closure:

We regret to announce that the Los Angeles Examiner will discontinue publication after this coming Sunday, January 7.

However, starting the next day, Monday, January 8, the Los Angeles Herald-Express will become a seven-day evening and Sunday newspaper. It will be named the Herald-Examiner and the Sunday edition will appear January 14.

The conditions which force the Examiner to cease publication are the same conditions that have resulted in the demise of many other well-known

newspapers throughout the country. Costs have risen far more rapidly than revenue. Continuing losses, with no foreseeable change in the trend, make discontinuance of the Examiner an economic necessity.⁸³

It became clear years later that closing the Examiner was a huge economic mistake in the long run. The results of the analysis done by the Hearst organization when the morning/evening deal was first proposed and the analysis done by Times Mirror Company a year later proved to be correct. The arrangement heavily favored Chandler. Many of the Examiner's best reporters moved to the Times. And by exclusively occupying the coveted morning position, the Times gained prestige and became more attractive to advertisers.⁸⁴

Managing Editor

After the Herald-Express was renamed the Herald Examiner, Underwood stayed on as city editor, but part of the soul of the Herald-Express seemed to leave with its name. Some of what Underwood once described to an interviewer as "the fighting spirit that made the old newspapers great"⁸⁵ began to disappear and a new emphasis on the bottom line began to take its place. Morale was generally low. Most of Herald-Express staffers had thrived on the rivalry they had with the Examiner; as one observer noted, "the two Hearst papers seemed to compete hardest against each other, instead of against the Chandler papers."⁸⁶ With the Examiner gone, the game wasn't as much

fun to play.

Discussing the period between 1962 and 1964 with an interviewer, Underwood told the following anecdote:

The fun and glory was going out of it. It was calming down. For years for instance, ever since I'd been city editor, when the temperature reached 100 degrees I bought a case of beer for the copy desk. It was standard procedure, a gag. One day the temperature reached 100 degrees and I sent a copy boy out for the beer. One of the executives called me in. He said to me, 'Are those men out there drinking beer?' I said yes. And he said, 'Go out there and tell them to stop.' And I said, you go tell them to stop. I bought it for them."⁸⁷

In 1964, when Underwood was promoted to assistant managing editor, she put away the gun and baseball bat that had remained on her desk throughout her years as city editor. Sadly, she knew they had become anachronistic.⁸⁸

She worked in her new executive position for four years, but the job never appealed to her. She later told a reporter, "The pace was so slow it almost bored me to death, but I surely would have died if I would have retired straight from my desk."⁸⁹

On December 15, 1967, Newspaper Guild Local 69 and eight craft unions went out on strike at the Herald Examiner. To the union the issue was money. Herald Examiner reporters were the lowest paid on any major metropolitan newspaper in the country and the Hearst organization was not willing to negotiate a contract that would give them competitive salaries.⁹⁰

Perhaps one of the reasons a settlement was

impossible was because George Hearst, Jr., the Herald Examiner's publisher, regarded a strike as an opportunity to rid his newspaper of unions once and for all. He believed unions were the major problem at the Herald Examiner because they interfered with his right to run his company as he pleased. In 1964, two years after he became publisher, Hearst had had a run-in with the Newspaper Guild which he never forgot. He wanted to hire some "combo" men, reporters who were also photographers. The Guild refused him on the grounds that there was no provision allowing one person to do two different jobs. The argument made no sense to him; it was inefficient. He liked to call it "featherbedding."⁹¹

The strike was long and bitter, ending in 1974 when the unions ran out of money. The unions lost, but so did George Hearst. The quality of the paper had deteriorated and its advertising revenues were the lowest of any daily newspaper in the State of California.⁹²

Underwood did not stay through the strike--it was too painful. She was an executive but her loyalty remained with her staff. She told an interviewer:

The strike was a sad time. I was very unhappy working as assistant managing editor. I like the thrill of working the city desk. It was time for me to step down.

I was leaving in January. They [the staff] were going to give me a pin for Christmas but the strike came and there was no Christmas party. They decided to give it to me on my birthday, which happened to be on a Sunday. I noticed that there was a lot of phoning going on at the copy desk. Then one of the copy editors gave me the pin and

handed me the phone. Out of the phone came people singing 'Happy Birthday.' I looked out the window and here, across the street, were all these strikers around the phone booth singing. Things like that can't help but tear you to pieces. I wanted to give the pin back so they could get their money back. Some of the guys on that picket line had worked their hearts out for me. You're only as good as your staff makes you look.⁹³

On January 14, 1968--33 years after the day she started working for the Herald-Express and 42 years after she took her first job at the Record--Agness Underwood retired.

Conclusions

Although prior to 1947 Underwood had established a reputation as one of the best general-assignment reporters in Los Angeles and as one of the few women who covered the crime, court and police beats⁹⁴, her accomplishments were not unprecedented. When Jack Campbell promoted her to city editor, her unprecedented experience began. Women rarely made it into management and as Jack Smith later commented, "He lifted her out of the ordinary and Aggie recognized it."⁹⁵

She also realized that because she was being touted in the press and among her colleagues as the first woman to become city editor of a large metropolitan daily, she would have to prove her competence. For Underwood, who cared so desperately about the opinions of others, being in the spotlight was probably an added incentive for her to meet the challenge.

In the beginning, she knew little about running a city desk, but her journalism experience, especially the years she had spent at the Record learning a broad range of skills from clerical and reporting to production, gave her an advantage. Her brief stint as the publisher of the Los Angeles Guardian also proved to be beneficial in terms of developing management skills.

The wide spectrum of stories she had covered as a reporter for both the Record and the Herald-Express gave her an in-depth knowledge of the city, its government and its people. While covering crime, court and police beats, she established a friendly working relationship with law enforcement and government personnel. At the same time, she developed numerous sources on the other side of the law among prisoners and underworld figures. By the time she became city editor, she had a well-rounded practical knowledge of the newspaper business in addition to maintaining an unusually large number of sources on both sides of the law, and her staff respected her for it.

Her relationship with her staff was not unlike that of an athletic coach with his or her team. She seemed to view journalism as a highly competitive game to be won or lost by the Herald's ability to scoop the competition. She encouraged team spirit, creating a cohesiveness and camaraderie among her staff which motivated them work to compete with the competition rather than against each other.

At the same time, she treated each member of her staff as an individual. According to photographer Coy Watson, who worked for her during the 1940s, she knew enough about each person on her staff to match an assignment with a reporter or photographer according to his or her strengths, thus getting the type of coverage she wanted.⁹⁶ Once she made the assignment, her expectations were high, and according to former staffers such as Jack Smith and Stan Leppard, rarely did anyone let her down.⁹⁷

It's likely the loyalty of her staff was based on mutual respect, but it's also probable that Underwood's attitude toward work helped morale. Watson believed the single most important reason her staff would do practically anything for her was that she made the job fun.⁹⁸ The constant shenanigans and the continual supply of beer in the city room must have made working at the Herald-Express seem like a never-ending office party.

Charisma, drive and coming up through the ranks might have been enough to ensure her success in the editorship, but there was a fourth factor that was equally important. She made some practical improvements that increased her effectiveness on the job. One early example was a bookkeeping system she created to record and trace assignments which streamlined the entire operation of the city room. At first the system had met with staff opposition because nothing like it had ever been tried before. But gradually everyone became impressed with the

efficiency of the new method.

As an editor, just as she had done as a reporter, Underwood was willing to learn on the job by trial and error. By relying primarily on her own strengths and intuition she developed a personal management style congruent with the newspaper business at the time. She probably exceeded everyone's expectations, including her own, in terms of success. She lasted an unprecedented 17 years in the position before being promoted to managing editor in 1964 and while she was at the desk, the circulation rose from 100,000 to 700,000.

CHAPTER VII NOTES

¹"City Editor," Time, June 30, 1947, pp. 61-62.

²"Tagging Along With Aggie," Newsweek, March 24, 1987, p. 67.

³Ibid.

⁴According to an article by Alice Craig Greene, "Madame City Editor," The Woman, December, 1947, p. 56, Jack Campbell made Agness temporary city editor in January, 1947, when the previous city editor became ill. The earlier date would explain why the March 24, 1947 date on the Newsweek article preceded the date on Campbell's official memo announcing the editorship.

⁵Agness Underwood Collection.

⁶"City Editor," pp. 61-62, "Tagging Along With Aggie," p. 67.

⁷Stan Leppard, "Aggie's Torrid Era At Helm of Paper Bared," Long Beach Independent Press-Telegram, 24 August 1980, p. 2.

⁸"City Editor," p. 61.

⁹Letter from Mary Evelyn Weed, April 8, 1986.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Greene, "Madame City Editor," p. 56.

¹²Agness Underwood, Newspaperwoman (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1949), p. 103.

¹³Henstell, "Newspaperwoman Tells All About It," p. 6.

¹⁴Letter from Mary Evelyn Weed, April 8, 1986.

- 15Henstell, "Newspaperwoman Tells All About It," p.
6.
- 16Letter from Mary Evelyn Weed, April 8, 1986.
- 17Ibid.
- 18Leppard, "Aggie's Torrid Era At Helm of Paper
Bared," p. 2.
- 19Interview with Jack Smith, March 7, 1985.
- 20Interview with Gladwyn Hill, July 1, 1985.
- 21Ibid.
- 22Leppard, "Aggie's Torrid Era At Helm of Paper
Bared," p. 2.
- 23Henstell, "Newspaperwoman Tells All About It," p.
6.
- 24Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 179.
- 25Ibid., p. 280.
- 26Ibid., p. 279.
- 27Ibid., p. 279.
- 28Ibid., p. 280.
- 29Leppard, "Aggie's Torrid Era At Helm of Paper
Bared," p. 2.
- 30Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 280.
- 31Leppard, "Aggie's Torrid Era At Helm of Paper
Bared," p. 2.
- 32Jack Smith, untitled column, Los Angeles Times, 6
July 1984, Section V, p. 1.
- 33Ibid.
- 34Henstell, "Newspaperwoman Tells All About It," pp.
5-6.
- 35Interview with Jack Smith, March 7, 1987.
- 36Smith, untitled column, Los Angeles Times, 6 July
1984, Section V, p. 1.
- 37Ibid.

³⁸Charles Nazarian, "That's Agness With a Double 'S'," San Fernando Valley News, Magazine section, 7 December 1980, p. 5.

³⁹Letter from Mary Evelyn Weed, April 4, 1986.

⁴⁰Newsweek, "Tagging Along with Aggie," June 30, 1947, p. 67.

⁴¹"City Editor," Time, June 30, 1947, p. 61.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Letter from Mary Evelyn Weed, April 4, 1986.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 285.

⁴⁸Louise Peete, As Told to Agness Underwood, "'Martyr' Says Mrs. Peete On Eve of Execution," Los Angeles Herald-Express, 10 April 1947, p. 1.

⁴⁹Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 285.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 288.

⁵¹Interview with Gladwyn Hill, July 1, 1985.

⁵²Beulah L. Overell, As Told to Agness Underwood, "Beulah Overell's Own Story," Los Angeles Herald-Express, 2 April 1947, p. 1.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid., pp. 1-2.

⁵⁵Ibid., pp. 285-86.

⁵⁶Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 287.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Leppard, "Aggie's Torrid Era At Helm of Paper Bared," p. 2.

⁵⁹Walt Anderson, "The Holy Terror of the 'Her-Ex' Calls it 30." Los Angeles Magazine, March 1968, p. 33.

⁶⁰Deposition of Agness Underwood, taken in Beverly Hills, CA., July 13, 1981, on behalf of defendant Ovid Demaris in connection with a lawsuit filed by Underwood against CBS, Inc. and Ovid Demaris. AUC. The lawsuit is discussed in further detail in Chapter VIII.

⁶¹Anderson, "The Holy Terror of the 'Her-Ex' Calls It 30," p. 8.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Leppard, "Aggie's Torrid Era of Helm of Paper Bared," p. 2.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷The Los Angeles Daily News folded on December 25, 1954, after a representative of the Chandlers bought it out. The Chandlers received the name, goodwill and all assets of the paper. Gottlieb and Wolt, Thinking Big, pp. 293-294.

⁶⁸Lindsay Chaney and Michael Cieply, The Hearsts, Family and Empire, The Later Years, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981), p. 206.

⁶⁹Gottlieb and Wolt, Thinking Big, p. 288.

⁷⁰Chaney and Cieply, The Hearsts, Family and Empire, p. 207.

⁷¹Gottlieb and Wolt, Thinking Big, The Story of the Los Angeles Times, p. 350.

⁷²Ibid., p. 350.

⁷³Ibid., p. 207.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 208.

⁷⁵Chaney and Cieply, The Hearsts, Family and Empire, p. 207.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 209.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹Gottlieb and Wolt, Thinking Big, p. 351.

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Chaney and Cieply, The Hearsts, Family, Empire, p. 253. The closings prompted a Congressional hearing in 1963 to investigate newspaper mergers with special attention paid to the Hearst/Chandler situation. Congressman Emanuel Celler, Chairman of the House anti-trust subcommittee decided that although Hearst and Chandler technically broke the law, he saw no point in prosecuting them. Information in the hearings formed the basis for the Newspaper Preservation Act of 1970 which exempts newspapers from much anti-trust legislation.

⁸³"To Our Readers," (proofsheet of announcement), [January 6, 1962], AUC.

⁸⁴Chaney and Cieply, The Hearsts Family and Empire, p. 255.

⁸⁵Henstell, "Newspaperwoman Tells All About It," p. 8.

⁸⁶Chaney and Cieply, Hearsts, The Family, and Empire, p. 211.

⁸⁷Henstell, "Newspaperwoman Tells All About It," p. 8.

⁸⁸Hazard, "Pandemonium, Deadlines and Wit," p. 7.

⁸⁹Ibid.

⁹⁰Chaney and Cieply, The Hearsts, Family and Empire, pp. 252-53.

⁹¹Ibid., p. 254.

⁹²Ibid., p. 323.

⁹³Henstell, "Newspaperwoman Tells All About It," p. 8.

⁹⁴Walt Anderson, "The Holy Terror of the 'Her-Ex' Calls It 30," March 1968, p. 31.

⁹⁵Interview with Jack Smith, March 7, 1985.

⁹⁶Interview with Coy Watson, February 4, 1987.

⁹⁷Interview with Jack Smith, March 7, 1985. Leppard, "Aggie's Torrid Era At Helm of Paper Bared," p. 2.

CHAPTER VIII

CREATING AN IMAGE

When Underwood retired from the Herald Examiner in 1968, the most important thing she took with her, besides her memories, was her reputation. She was trusted by her sources and respected by her colleagues. During her 41 years in the newspaper business she had received numerous honors,¹ including the prestigious "Woman of the Year Award" in 1960 from her paper's competitor, the Los Angeles Times, and a special citation for achievement in the 1962 edition of Who's Who In American Women. But the widest national recognition she received prior to her retirement stemmed from two events: her promotion to the city desk in 1947 and the publication of her autobiography in 1949.

Development of an Image

In June 1947, shortly after Underwood became city editor, she facetiously told two reporters from Time magazine that she was going to write a book on "'things I know about newspapermen their wives don't know'"² A few weeks later, after the quote appeared in a Time profile,³

her flippant remark generated serious interest from a book publisher. And in June 1949, Harper and Brothers published her autobiography, Newspaperwoman. "I did a different book," she said, "a book which was set in motion by that chance quote."⁴

It is doubtful that Harper and Brothers ever expected Underwood to write a book about the secret lives of newspapermen. It is far more likely, after reading the Time profile, they recognized the commercial potential of publishing the story of a colorful, tough-talking, woman city editor in the "Front Page" tradition, who loved covering a good murder.

In 1947, when Harper and Brothers approached Underwood about doing a book, she was interested but too involved with her new responsibilities as city editor to spend the time writing it. Rather than pass up the opportunity, she enlisted the help of her friend, Foster Goss, as co-author. "He wrote most of it," she acknowledged in later years. "I would write a copy, but the final draft was mostly his."⁵ Goss had known Underwood from the time she worked as a switchboard operator at the Record, and they had worked as reporters together at the Herald-Express during the late 1930s and early 1940s.⁶ Their long friendship was likely a major consideration in her decision to trust him with the story of her life.

Newspaperwoman was written in 1948. Underwood said, "Every time I thought of something that might be good for

the book, I wrote it down so that I would remember to tell him [Goss] about it."⁷ Later she and Goss had long conversations about the cards on which she had written her notes and sorted through research Underwood's daughter had accumulated by going through her mother's scrapbooks and personal papers. After coming to a joint decision about which material to use, Goss organized and wrote the book, giving Underwood the proofs for final editing.⁸

According to Underwood's daughter, although the facts were correct in the finished product, her mother was not pleased with some of Goss' long descriptive passages and his excessive use of four-letter words. She said Underwood frequently used "hell" and "damn" in normal conversation, but rarely any other kind of profanity. She believed that because Goss was a friend, her mother didn't want to hurt his feelings by complaining.⁹ However it's probably reasonable to assume that Underwood considered the problems to be minor; otherwise, it's hard to believe she would have let them pass.

Regardless of how she felt about its content, when Newspaperwoman came out in June 1949, it had a major impact on her life. While it's true that the promotion to city editor brought her some national recognition, the book, and the publicity surrounding it, reached a far broader audience. A memo listing clips of reviews published between the dates of June 4 and July 12, 1949, shows 97 newspapers across the country carried reviews of her

autobiography.¹⁰

Most reviewers made liberal use of the lively anecdotes in the book which portrayed Underwood as an aggressive crime reporter, an inveterate practical joker and a charismatic city editor who drove her staff as hard as she drove herself. Many reviewers also mentioned her unhappy childhood. But the theme that permeated most of the reviews was Underwood's "masculine" approach to reporting.

The following excerpt from a review in the San Francisco Examiner is a typical example:

This is a man-sized chunk from the man-sized experiences of Aggie Underwood, boss of the Los Angeles Herald-Express Her book is the story of her life as a reporter It isn't a "woman's angle" reporter, either. From early in her career, Aggie Underwood was all reporter. She has long been known by her colleagues as a newspaperman's newspaperwoman. This is a high point in her acclaim; for members of her profession are as chary with that heady stuff as they are with adjectives.¹¹

The observation was not new. As previously mentioned in Chapter Six, Jack Campbell described Underwood in a 1937 profile as "a rip-snorting, go-gettum reporter ... who should have been a man."¹² The image was perpetuated in a June 1947 Time article (the one Underwood claimed gave Harper and Brothers the idea for the book) when one of the Herald-Express staffers was quoted as saying, "Aggie's not a woman. She's a newspaperman."¹³

It's interesting to note that in Newspaperwoman, Underwood's image as one of the boys was enhanced by the language, which one reviewer described as "uninhibited profanity and journalistic lingo."¹⁴ Despite any private objections Underwood had to Goss putting those words in her mouth, publicly she accepted them as her own. Her name alone was listed as the author of Newspaperwoman. To the public, she was the narrator and she never tried to change that perception. It is likely that if she was displeased with the inappropriateness of a few words, she nevertheless liked the overall effect of the book and the impression it created of her.

From a commercial standpoint, the image of Underwood as presented in Newspaperwoman had at least one clear advantage--the book could be sold to males as well as females. The following excerpt from a radio spot in which a male announcer and a woman speaker discussed Underwood's upcoming appearance at an autograph party at The Broadway department store in downtown Los Angeles illustrates the point:

Annc: Oh say..¹⁵ this party isn't going to be exclusively for the gals alone. I'd like to meet Miss Underwood myself.

Dixon: Well, your [sic] invited too, Herb ... you know ... she covered every important west coast murder and criminal for the past 21 years ... and every major happening ... sometimes at risk to her life. She's been and still is on top of every story that breaks seven ... seven edition a day worth ... and through it all she has managed to raise a family as she terms it--"by telephone."

A Film Project

An undated letter from Foster Goss and the first 16 pages of a film treatment which were discovered in Underwood's papers reveal that at some point after the publication of Newspaperwoman, Underwood and Goss made a serious attempt to adapt the book into a movie.¹⁶ Although the correspondence refers to developing the movie version of the autobiography, not about writing the original book, it still provides some revealing insight into the Underwood-Goss collaboration. It becomes apparent early in the letter that Goss had some very definite ideas about the kind of image of Underwood he wanted to convey. The letter begins with a description of the plot:

Dear Agness:

Enclosed is another batch of copy, designed to begin the crescendo of the growth of characterization as the shy young housewife and mother emerges from her shell and starts treading the transition that will build until she achieves her adventures as an outspoken, go-get-'em reporter.¹⁷

He also explained why he wanted to develop a subplot which would focus on her struggle, as a young married woman, to make ends meet. He felt that by showing a strong financial motivation, he could make movie-goers understand why Underwood went into the newspaper business in the first place. The implication was that audiences in the early 1950s would not accept the idea of a married woman with a family working outside the home unless it was an economic

necessity.¹⁸ This line of thinking provides a good explanation of why Underwood's autobiography began with the following disclaimer:

I am no feminist. If I were asked what I regard as the woman's place, I'd probably give the old-fashioned answer: In the home. However, I'm not one of those women who, because they must go to work five days a week to earn their own living, think that the homebody has a cinch lolling about the house.¹⁹

It's also clear from the letter that Goss, who had tried to impart a real newspaper atmosphere in the book by using plenty of newspaper jargon and descriptive details about life in the city room, had the dual objective in this latest project of telling the dramatic story of Underwood's life and creating an "authentic" newspaper movie. He knew it was going to be a challenge. Aside from the film version of "The Front Page" and an early movie adaption of a play called "Gentleman of the Press," he felt no one had ever come close to capturing the reality of the newsroom on the screen. He analyzed the problem in this way:

Perhaps the reason is that they move over to false premises. They become phony because they seek to reconvert some tried, cut-and-dried "plot," which could be superimposed on the background of any of several callings.

With your book a similar danger confronts us. If we wander too far afield, actually we'll be attempting to do another story. The lurking danger is that we may fall into the trap of just another newspaper travesty or, when we enter the crime and murderer passages, just another cops-and-robbers story.²⁰

Nevertheless, Goss assured her that he felt

Newspaperwoman had all of the right elements "to project the first real bona fide newspaper picture." And he explained that by focusing on the drama and humor in her life they would be able to personalize the story to attract audiences.²¹

In the last paragraph of the letter he asked for Underwood's opinion on the material he sent her, indicating that the project would not progress very far without her approval.

Before proceeding, I think it wise to have some indication on whether I am groping in the right direction or whether I am barking up the wrong tree (or, to mix the metaphor, I should pick up my pick and go back to digging ditches).²²

If Underwood was irritated by Goss' long descriptive passages in the book, she must have had a hard time reading the copy for his film treatment. He played up even the smallest details for dramatic effect. His handling of the anecdote about Underwood's desire to have a new pair of silk stockings is a good example. In the book the copy simply said:

My sister still lived with us and was working, nevertheless we always seemed strapped. So I wore her discarded silk hosiery.

One day I asked my husband for money to buy a new pair of stockings. Harried about finances he no doubt regarded as more pressing, he found himself refusing. We quarreled.

"All right," I said, "I'll go out and get myself a job and earn my own stockings."²³

In contrast, Goss' copy for the film proposal is much

more melodramatic. He described in minute detail the laborious process Underwood went through to salvage discarded hosiery to wear.

She runs the balls of her fingers through each stocking, guarding against snagging with her finger nails. She sights a stocking against the light for a better view of the runs. When inspection discloses a stocking not torn beyond repair, she lays it carefully aside. Then she sorts through the pile for a likely mate. It is hard going ... she threads a needle and begins the tedious, eyes-close [sic] chore of mending.²⁴

The film treatment, unlike the book, elaborated on what was said during the argument Underwood and her husband had over purchasing the silk stockings. In doing so, it shed new light on how the frustration of the Underwood's precarious financial situation affected each of them, bringing out attitudes and responses that would re-emerge later in their marriage. The following excerpt comes after a scene in which Harry asked Agness why she was mending old hosiery and she dramatically lifted her skirt, revealing patched-up, second-hand stockings, to demonstrate why she needed to buy a new pair.

A spat builds up as she scoffs and repeats that she would like a new pair. As she amplifies her reasons, he interrupts and accuses her of harboring a secret ambition for silk stockings. Well, he announces, he has a secret ambition, too. There is a pause in which she shows her wondering, a little fearfully. Then he blurts that his secret ambition is, "a steak, a great big steak. I get tired of stew and meat balls all the time."²⁵

In this version of the story, when Agness suggested

getting a job to help pay the bills, Harry was threatened not only because he felt emasculated by having his wife go to work, as the book suggested, but also because he was worried that Agness would neglect her domestic and family responsibilities, and ultimately neglect him.

He appeals to her motherhood. He refers to her bleak years as an orphan before they were married. He declares: "I'd think you'd appreciate your home. We've got plenty, alongside what we started out with. Me, adopted. You, an orphan I guess you're just tired of being a wife and a mother."²⁶

The attitude of Harry Underwood as a young husband, portrayed in this film treatment, was very similar to the attitude of Harry Underwood as a middle-aged man who finally gave his wife the ultimatum. "The job or me."²⁷ He wanted her to be a wife and mother first. But he discovered in both instances she had a mind of her own--appealing to her sense of guilt worked no better than issuing threats--and ultimately they were divorced.

As Goss started to adapt the book for the movies, it became clear from the first pages of his copy that he wanted to embellish, rather than change, Underwood's image. Goss' synopsis of "Newspaperwoman," the movie, could just as easily have been a description of Newspaperwoman, the book. He portrayed Underwood as an adventurous, fun-loving hard news reporter, who achieved success through hard work and determination despite the many obstacles she had to overcome.

"Newspaperwoman" is the story of the adventures, both humorous and dramatic, of Agness Underwood whose action-packed achievements as a city-side reporter have covered the highlights and the sinister shadows of sensation-rich, celebrity-avid Los Angeles for two decades.

It's a woman's story. It's a man's story. It's a kid's story. It's a family story--tracing the determination of a young mother that her two children would not be exposed to the jolts and cruelties she experienced as an orphan and outcast.²⁸

Two paragraphs also show that there was a conscious attempt to project an image of Underwood that would appeal to the working class--the same type of person who bought the Herald-Express.

It is an American success story. But it is not a story of stuffy success. High in hilarity, adventure and action, it shows that there can be laughter and humor as well as courage in adversity.

"Newspaperwoman" proves that spunk, hard work and faith despite failure will carry a warm-hearted woman to eventual success. It shows that greatness is made of simplicity, with compassion for the unfortunate and courageous opposition to the unjust.²⁹

Becoming a Celebrity

The movie "Newspaperwoman," never materialized. If it had, the name Agness Underwood might have become a household word. However, after the publication of her autobiography, her name did spread beyond local journalism circles and she began to emerge as a public figure. To promote the book she attended autograph parties,³⁰ gave interviews to the press³¹ and guested on radio shows.³² Simultaneously, she was promoting herself.

Among Underwood's papers was a script from "Queen For A Day," a program of the 1950s on which women contestants vied with each other everyday to be selected as queen and have their dreams come true. No doubt as part of a publicity campaign to promote Newspaperwoman, Underwood agreed to let one of the winners come to the Herald-Express and work for her for a day. The following excerpt from the script illustrates the glamorous image attached to Underwood's job:

Jack: Queen Marjorie, You know most everyone at some time or other has wanted to be a newspaper reporter, and go around on all their exciting beats, to report the news. Well ... take a good grip on that crown, because that's what you're gonna do! You are our "Newspaper Queen For A Day!" ... And starting bright and early tomorrow morning you're going to work your way up from a cub reporter to a newspaper editor!"³³

As expected from a promotional gimmick, the script hyped the book and exposed Underwood's name and reputation to more people. And having Jack Bailey, a popular television personality, describe her with superlatives had to increase her credibility with the public. The following dialogue illustrates:

Jack: You'll go down to the "Herald-Express" Offices, where you'll meet one of the most famous city editor's in the country ... Mrs. Agness Underwood! The only female city editor of a metropolitan newspaper! She is really a fabulous woman, Marjorie. How she manages to run a home, raise two children, pump criminals, scrutinize corpses, wheedle officials, and climb right on up the ladder to become the only woman city editor of the nation's metropolitan newspaper, only Mrs. Underwood herself can tell you.

Among the hundreds of other things editor "Aggie" has done ... she's found time to write a new book entitled "Newspaperwoman." Here is a copy for you ... so you can read all about this dynamic lady city editor.³⁴

On November 7, 1956, Underwood was the subject of Ralph Edwards' popular nation-wide television broadcast "This Is Your Life."³⁵ Her appearance on the show was important because it was both a validation of her accomplishments as a newspaperwoman and a boost to her celebrity status. Being honored on the program meant that her life was important and interesting enough to be included on a show that reached millions of television viewers across the country.

The Herald-Express shamelessly used the publicity for all it was worth by putting out an extra edition with the banner headline, "Agness Underwood, This Is Your Life," emblazoned in big, bold letters across the top of the page. The story, accompanied by a large 3-column photograph of Underwood, was placed prominently on the upper right side of the page and quoted host Ralph Edwards extensively as he sang Underwood's praises.³⁶ The following excerpt is an example of the copy:

Ralph Edwards, of "This Is Your Life," has recreated the lives of many famous people. And, in his own words, never had he found a truer, more heart-warming "rags-to-riches" drama. "Not rags to riches in the literal sense," said Edwards, "but rags to riches with a far more important meaning."

"Agness Underwood, as a child, was a ragamuffin when it came to love, affection and friends."

"Today, as a woman, she counts her wealth not

in great worldly goods but in something far more precious; the love and affection of wonderful children and grandchildren; true friends whose numbers are legion and whose place in life extends from Main Street to Capitol Hill and the respect and admiration of the entire world."

"Here truly," Edwards concluded, "is the story of a woman whose life was molded by determination, bravery, self-sacrifice and the timely help of a handful of truly wonderful people."³⁷

According to her long-time friend Fran O'Neill, Underwood never took any award for granted, regardless of its size. "I think it was because of her total background," O'Neill explained. "She just felt inadequate and had to fight twice as hard to become what she was. And then, of course, she was enormously proud to receive recognition from anyone."³⁸

Despite her busy schedule, she took the time to express her appreciation to those who acknowledged her even in small ways. A letter she wrote to syndicated columnist Walter Winchell, thanking him for mentioning her in one of his columns, is a typical example.

Dear Mr. Winchell:

The presses are running off the first edition and the papers have just come upstairs.

It has been a busy morning since I opened the city desk at 4:15--a morning made pleasant with lots of work.

And now it is made evenmore [sic] pleasant by the very kind mention in your column.

Again, please permit me to express my appreciation.

With all good wishes to you and yours,

Respectively,

Agness Underwood³⁹

Although it is likely her thoughtfulness was genuine,

she was astute enough to realize the value of good public relations. In her autobiography she explained, "I find that courtesy and respect paid to others, small and great, through the years results today in dividends."⁴⁰

She was also gracious when responding to her critics. A letter she wrote to a columnist from the New York Times who accused her of wrongfully claiming she was the first woman city editor of a metropolitan newspaper was an example of the diplomatic way she handled an image problem.⁴¹ The letter is important for two reasons. First, it is one of the few places where Underwood discussed her feelings about being described as the first woman city editor of a metropolitan daily. Second, it shows that she went out of her way to make sure she was not perceived as pretentious or immodest about her success. It is interesting to note that the item about her appeared in the News on July 23, 1949, and the letter was not written until March 14, 1950, suggesting that after almost eight months the columnist's reproach bothered her enough to try and clear up his impression of her. The following is an excerpt from the letter:

I started to write you at the time [the item appeared] but decided otherwise, for fear that my doing so might have appeared as if I were trying to coax a correction or insinuate my name into your valuable column again. I wanted no correction then nor do I now.

But to keep the record straight: I've leaned over backward to avoid any semblance of a claim that I'm the "first" or "only" female city editor, metropolitan or small-town. The truth is that I don't know and I never have the time nor the

inclination to undertake the research to establish a fact less important than the ability to do the assigned job.⁴²

The letter also shows Underwood's sensitivity toward the feelings of others:

I realize superlative claims have been made in my behalf. While most no doubt were well-meaning, they nevertheless cause one to wince. In addition, I have let a number of inaccuracies pass unchallenged, because I in turn did not want to cause embarrassment to those who wrote them. I prefer to acknowledge the good will and kindness which have been extended to me so overwhelmingly.

At this late date, allow me to say that I do appreciate you having included my name in your column.⁴³

Stepping Down

On January 24, 1968, ten days after Underwood's retirement from the Herald Examiner, a testimonial banquet was held at the Hollywood Palladium in her honor. Among the 1,200 people⁴⁴ who came to pay tribute to her were Hollywood celebrities, local politicians and law enforcement personnel, friends and colleagues. Despite the labor-management dispute at the paper, both Guild members and executives attended.⁴⁵ It was a statement of love and respect to cap the end of her extraordinary career in journalism.

However, Underwood herself never used the term "career" to describe what she did for a living. Most likely it sounded too high-brow to suit her. Several years after her retirement, she told a reporter, "It wasn't a

career, it was a job I loved." But she added that she was glad she left the business when she did.⁴⁶

After she retired, Underwood became disillusioned with the direction newspapers were taking and she claimed she avoided reading them most of the time. She told an interviewer, "'Every time I hear of a big story breaking and grab a newspaper to see what they are doing with it, it looks like they haven't decided yet what to do with it. It's disheartening.'"47

She felt the trend toward analysis and away from old-fashioned reporting made newspapers seem like magazines. She complained, "'Think pieces. Analysis. Syndicated tripe, just space fillers. Nobody is covering the news.'"48

To Underwood, news meant scoops, exclusives and gigantic headlines--the kind of journalism that grabbed people's attention. The term "sensationalism" held no negative connotation for her and she was proud to be one of its practitioners. "Every big news story is sensational, that's what makes it a big story," she explained to an interviewer. "All we did was make sure the reader understood that."⁴⁹

Underwood's life after she left the newspaper business calmed down considerably. A few months after her retirement, at age 65, an interviewer asked what she planned for the future. She explained to him that for years she had gotten up long before dawn to go to work at a

quarter to four in the morning. She said, "'I want to find out what it feels like to sleep late every day. I'll worry about what else I'm going to do later.'"50

With no deadlines to meet, Underwood relaxed at home trying out recipes from her large cookbook collection, gardening and reading books she had never had time for when she worked. She enjoyed frequent visits to her children and five grandchildren.⁵¹

She also spent much time seeing friends, both old and new. She regularly met with "The Mary Lunch Bunch," an informal group of eight women who gradually became friends during the 1970s after it turned out they ate at the lunch counter of the Newberry store in the Rolling Hills Shopping Center at the same time every day. The women named the group after Mary McAdow, the manager of the lunch counter who served them their food while they discussed current events with each other.⁵²

She saved her memories of the past for the newspaper reporters who wanted to interview a "living legend," (a term frequently used to describe her in the years following her retirement).⁵³ Probably because she knew which stories interviewers wanted to hear, profiles of Underwood during the 1970s and early 1980s usually contained lively new versions of old anecdotes from her autobiography. She reminisced about the ghastliness of the crimes she covered, the competition and camaraderie among her colleagues, and the raucous good times in the city room. She talked about

her belief in loyalty, humility and the value of hard work.⁵⁴ Consequently her image in the press remained largely the same over a span of more than 30 years.

There is good reason to believe she enjoyed giving interviews after her retirement. Not only did it give her an opportunity to talk about the "good old days," it provided her with proof that she was important enough to be remembered and cared about. She was particularly fond of the interview she did in 1980 with her former reporter, Stan Leppard, for the Long Beach Independent Press Telegram. "It was like reading a love letter," she said.⁵⁵ And for Underwood that was what it was all about.

Lawsuit Defending Her Reputation

Image was important to Underwood and in April 1981 she filed a \$110 million suite against the writer and publisher of a book she claimed defamed her.⁵⁶ The suit involved a passage in The Last Mafioso, a book in which the life story of mobster Jimmy "The Weasel" Fratianno was told to, and by writer Ovid Demaris.

The passage in question referred to an incident involving gangster Mickey Cohen, who, according to Fratianno, had pocketed \$1 million from contributors to the Israeli cause during the late 1940s and then tried to cover up his theft by planting a story in the Herald-Express stating that a ship carrying arms to the State of Israel had gone down at sea. Fratianno was quoted as saying:

[Cohen's] got this broad at the Herald, Aggie Underwood. She's a big editor there and this broad would walk on hot coals for Mickey. Prints any shit he gives her. The way I see it, Mickey called her and made up a story about buying guns and ammunition for the Jews and told her the boat sank.⁵⁷

In January 1961 Fratianno repeated the story on the CBS television program "Sixty Minutes." According to the deposition Underwood later gave, she was called by her daughter after the broadcast and informed of what Fratianno had said. In early February, the incident was discussed again on "The Hilly Rose Show," on Los Angeles radio station KMPC. The following day Underwood heard about the broadcast from a friend.⁵⁸

She claimed in her deposition that about a week after the broadcast she began suffering physical symptoms as a result of the book. "I didn't want to see people, didn't want to talk to people, didn't want to eat, couldn't sleep."⁵⁹

After she filed the lawsuit in April, she explained her action to a reporter. "I couldn't let this stand on the record and not make it clear. It's idiot stuff this man is charging."⁶⁰ She never denied that Mickey Cohen was a friend, but she said their friendship began in the early 1950s, not in the late 1940s when the incident in the book allegedly happened. She admitted to using him as a news source on many occasions, most notably when he obtained the Lana Turner-Johnny Stompanato letters. And she conceded

that she carried on a long correspondence with him while he was serving time in prison during the 1950s, which she explained by saying, "He was a good news source. I figured he would get out and be a good news source again."⁶¹

Underwood died before the lawsuit went to trial and it eventually was dropped by her family.

On the morning of July 3, 1984, she had a fatal heart attack in her home in Greeley, Colorado, then 81 years old, she had moved to Greeley three years before, because of failing health, to be near her son. She was 81 years old.

According to friends, her last few years were lonely.⁶² The decision to move to Greeley, had not been wholly her own. Her daughter wanted her to move to Phoenix to be with her, but Underwood couldn't stand the heat. So she went to Greeley where George lived, moving into a house across the street. "She hated to leave Southern California," Fran O'Neill remembered, "because all her 'children' were here," She explained, "Everyone who worked for Aggie became like her children."⁶³

Her funeral was held on Saturday, July 7, at St. James Episcopal Church in downtown Los Angeles. The church was packed with mourners.

The Image Goes On

At the time of her death it was practically a moot point whether Underwood really was the first female editor of a major metropolitan newspaper. The claim had been made

so often on her behalf that it became an indelible part of her image. Obituaries in three Los Angeles newspapers used the term to describe her.⁶⁴

Although each of the three obituaries had a slightly different focus, they all portrayed Underwood in basically the same way--as a tough, resourceful newspaperwoman out of the "Front Page" era of journalism who exemplified the American success story. Her image in the obituaries was essentially the same as her image in Newspaperwoman.⁶⁵

The Daily News, a San Fernando Valley newspaper, characterized her as "aggressive but discriminate, gentle but tough,"⁶⁶ and the Times said:

She once ruled with a combination of toughness, professional knowhow and sentimentality She earned her reputation as an old-time newspaperman's newspaperwoman ... [who] presided over a rackety, cluttered city room during the last-gasp period of sensational big-city journalism, when the scoop, beating the competition at all costs, the bizarre murder and the juicy Hollywood scandal were the staples of many newspapers.⁶⁷

The Times obituary also pointed out many of her personal characteristics--her remarkable memory, her charisma, her generosity and her loyalty--that became part of her reputation. For example:

Aggie not only knew the first names, but also middle names, the private phone numbers and many of the carefully guarded secrets of everyone from police chiefs to gangsters to movie stars.

She also knew how to inspire reporters to do their best.

As city editor, she made it her business to know everything about everyone of importance in the city and everything about everyone on her staff ... and whenever anyone on the staff got in trouble or needed money, she always saw to it that they got help.⁶⁸

The Herald Examiner also mentioned her aggressive reporting style and her amazing memory.

She was undeterred by the grisliest of crime scenes and had a knack for getting details that eluded other reporters. As editor, she knew the names and telephone numbers of numerous celebrities, in addition to all the bars her reporters frequented.

She cultivated the day's best sources, ranging from gangsters and prostitutes to movie stars and government officials.⁶⁹

Perhaps it's fitting that the Herald-Express was the one local newspaper to discuss the family-type relationship Underwood had with her staff. The article quoted Will Fowler, a longtime friend of Underwood's who had worked for her as a reporter during the late 1940s and early 1950s.

"Her family came first, but her reporters were family, too ... I felt more like a son almost, I guess. It was one of those limbo-type relationships where you don't know whether you're a son or a brother or what, but you know her blood's flowing through yours--blood or ink or whatever."⁷⁰

The strong self-portrait established in Underwood's 1949 autobiography Newspaperwoman solidified her image and provided the basis for subsequent profiles, articles and media broadcasts about her. In this way the media reinforced and perpetuated the image created by Underwood

and her co-author in the book. In turn, throughout her career Underwood lived up to her media image by enthusiastically re-telling many of the same anecdotes used in the book whenever she was interviewed. Thus, her media image changed very little over her lifetime.

CHAPTER VIII NOTES

¹See appendix for a full listing.

²Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 294.

³"City Editor," Time, June 30, 1947, pp. 61-62.

⁴Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 294.

⁵Deposition of Agness Underwood, taken in Beverly Hills, CA., July 13, 1981, on behalf of defendant Ovid Demaris in conjunction with lawsuit filed by Underwood against CBS, Inc., Ovid Demaris. Agness Underwood Collection, p. 41. The lawsuit, in which Underwood was asking \$110 million in damages, involved a comment made in, The Last Mafioso, by mobster Jimmy Fratianno as told to Ovid Demaris, published by Time Books, 1980. In the book Fratianno accused Underwood of printing anything mobster Mickey Cohen gave her.

⁶Walt Anderson, "The Holy Terror of the 'Her-Ex' Calls It 30," Los Angeles Magazine, March 1968, p. 33.

⁷Deposition, July 13, 1981, p. 41.

⁸Ibid., pp. 41-42.

⁹Letter from Mary Evelyn Weed to author, October 26, 1986.

¹⁰Item labeled "Agness Underwood Clips," July 12, 1949, AUC.

¹¹Untitled clipping, San Francisco Examiner, June 11, 1949, AUC, page number missing.

¹²John B.T. Campbell, "Headline Hunters of the Herald-Express Are Real Go-Getters," Los Angeles Herald-Express, 27 October 1937, Section C, p. 4.

¹³"City Editor," Time, June 30, 1947, p. 61.

¹⁴Willie M. McGhee, "L.A. News Girl's Autobiography Confesses All," (Dallas, Texas), Times Herald, June 12, 1949, AUC, page number unknown.

¹⁵Ellipsis are not author's. They are part of the radio script--probably used to denote pauses in the speech.

¹⁶Letter from Foster Goss to Agness Underwood, undated, AUC.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 1.

²⁰Letter from Foster Goss to Agness Underwood, undated, AUC.

²¹Ibid.

²²ibid.

²³Underwood, Newspaperwoman, pp. 29-30.

²⁴Letter from Foster Goss to Agness Underwood, undated, AUC.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Letter from Mary Evelyn Weed to author, April 4, 1986.

²⁸Letter from Foster Goss to Agness Underwood, undated, AUC.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Henstell, "Newspaperwoman Tells All About It," p. 2.

³¹Ibid.

³²Undated radio script, AUC. Content indicates it was written in 1949, shortly after the publication of Newspaperwoman.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵"Great Editor Honored on Edwards Show," Los Angeles Herald-Express, 7 November 1956, p. 1.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Interview with Fran O'Neill, November 10, 1984, Los Angeles, CA.

³⁹Letter from Agness Underwood to Walter Winchell, April 20, 1956, AUC. There are many similar notes in AUC.

⁴⁰Underwood, Newspaperwoman, p. 284.

⁴¹Letter from Agness Underwood to Denton Walker, March 14, 1950, AUC.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Charles R. Nazarian, "That's Agness With a Double 'S'," San Fernando Valley News, Sunday magazine supplement, 7 December 1980, p. 5.

⁴⁵Anderson, "The Holy Terror of the 'Her-Ex' Calls It 30," p. 31.

⁴⁶Leppard, "Aggie's Torrid Era At Helm of Paper Bared," p. 2.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹ibid.

⁵⁰Anderson, "The Holy Terror of the 'Her-Ex' Calls It 30," p. 33.

⁵¹Leppard, "Aggie's Torrid Era At Helm of Paper Bared," p. 2; Hazard, "Pandemonium, Deadlines and Wit," p. 7.

⁵²Leppard, "Aggie's Torrid Era At Helm of Paper Bared," p. 2; Nazarian, "That's Agness With A Double 'S'," pp. 4-5.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Leppard, "Aggie's Torrid Era At Helm of Paper Bared," pp. 1-2; Henstall, "Newspaperwoman Tells All About It," pp. 1-8.

⁵⁵Interview with Agness Underwood, May 1, 1983,

Northridge, CA.

⁵⁶Deposition taken on behalf of Ovid Demaris, July 13, 1981, p. 6, AUC.

⁵⁷Jimmy Fratianno as told to Ovid Demaris, The Last Mafioso (New York: Times Books, 1980), p. 29.

⁵⁸Deposition taken on behalf of Ovid Demaris, p. 59, AUC. CBS and radio station KMPC were also named defendants in the suit.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Henstell, "Newspaperwoman Tells All About It," p. 7.

⁶¹Deposition taken on behalf of Ovid Demaris, p. 23, AUC.

⁶²Interview with Fran O'Neill, November 10, 1984. Interview with Rilla Underwood, August 12, 1984, Carpinteria, CA.

⁶³Interview with Fran O'Neill, November 10, 1984, Los Angeles, CA.

⁶⁴Jerry Belcher, "Aggie Underwood, First Woman City Editor of Major Paper, Dies," Los Angeles Times, 4 July 1984, Section 2, p. 1. Joelle Cohen, "Aggie Underwood, an L.A. Legend, dies at 81," Los Angeles Herald Examiner, 4 July 1984, page number unknown; Greg Rippee, "Underwood, A Pioneer Woman City Editor, Dies," Daily News (Los Angeles, CA), p. 8.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Rippee, "Underwood, A Pioneer Woman City Editor, Dies," p. 8.

⁶⁷Belcher, "Aggie Underwood, First Woman City Editor of Major Paper, Dies," p. 2.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Cohen, "Aggie Underwood, an L.A. Legend, Dies at 81, page number unknown.

⁷⁰Ibid.

CHAPTER IX

CONCLUSIONS

Agness Underwood's journalism career spanned more than four decades, from 1926 until 1968. She was considered by many to be the most famous woman general assignment reporter in Los Angeles, but it was her promotion to city editor of Hearst's Los Angeles Herald-Express in 1947 that made history. Rarely, if ever, had a woman broken the management barrier on a major metropolitan daily.

Although this biographical study encompasses her entire life, it has focused on the relationship between the personality traits and motivational forces established during her formative years, and on her later accomplishments as an adult in a male-dominated profession. According to her daughter and her friends, Underwood had a deeply ingrained inferiority complex and feelings of insecurity throughout her career which contributed to her strong drive to achieve success. Both attitudes can be traced to emotional scars she received during her childhood.

This thesis asked the following research questions:

- 1) In What ways did the struggle of Underwood's early years influence her behavior later in life? In what ways did it influence her success?
- 2) What qualities were important to Underwood's acceptance in the city room?
- 3) What did Underwood have to do differently or more intensely than her male counterparts to succeed and survive?
- 4) Was Underwood accepted as an equal by her male colleagues? If so what elements of her background and/or character were most likely responsible? If not, why was this the case
- 5) What was her image in the media and how was it perpetuated? What part did her autobiography play in the public's perception of her? In what ways, if any, did her image change over the years?
- 6) In what ways, if any did her self-image change over the span of her career?

This thesis also postulated the following hypotheses:

- 1) The insecurity and low self-esteem Underwood felt as a child made her try especially hard to succeed as an adult.
- 2) The acquisition of stereotypical male survival skills during her youth halped her as a reporter.
- 3) Underwood's approach to reporting helped gain acceptance among her male colleagues.

4) However, she also had interpersonal skills more associated with women than men--such as empathy--which helped her both as a reporter and editor.

5) Underwood worked in journalism during the right period of time. There was a good match between Underwood's values and priorities, and the type of journalism that was being practiced by newspapers in Los Angeles during the span of her career from the 1920s through the 1960s.

6) Underwood's image changed over the span of her 42-year career to coincide with the changes occurring in journalism and society. As newspapers became less sensational, Underwood's public image became less flamboyant. As the concept of women in the workplace became more common, Underwood was portrayed less frequently as a woman doing a man's job.

Research questions one through three and hypotheses one through three are addressed in the following sections.

Ramifications of Being a Foster Child

Orphaned at age five after the death of her mother, she was separated from her younger sister and placed in a succession of foster homes and orphanages by her father, an itinerant glassblower who was unable to care for her. Rejected or mistreated by one temporary family after another, she began to wonder what was wrong with her.

At age six, an Indiana farm family gave her a home for the next nine years, but the permanency of the

situation did little to improve her self-esteem. Her foster parents, stern Midwesterners, provided her with physical necessities--food, clothing and shelter--but they were insensitive to her emotional needs. They did not understand that Agness, distraught over the loss of her mother and the disintegration of her family, needed love and reassurance about her future.

Surprisingly, in life the coldness and lack of sympathy she endured as a child did not make her a bitter adult; instead she became an extremely sensitive and empathetic person, especially to people who were down on their luck. During her years as a reporter, victims of tragedies and people accused of committing crimes, sensing her sympathetic, non-judgmental attitude, were more apt to talk freely to her than to many of her colleagues. Thus she was often able to get exclusives that eluded her peers.

Her compassion for others, however, did not prevent her from protecting her own interests. Her experience as an orphan, a foster child and later as a teen-ager fending for herself in California, taught her that she would have to depend primarily on herself to get what she wanted out of life. Taking a job at the Record over her husband's objections, and many years later refusing to quit when he gave her an ultimatum of choosing between him and her job, showed how strongly she felt about pursuing her own goals.

Eventually, even the puritanical child-rearing practices of her foster parents, which seemed rigid and

severe to Underwood at the time, had a positive effect on her career. As a reporter and later as an editor, the disciplined approach to work she had learned as a young girl was one of her most valuable assets. By working harder and longer than most of her peers she was able to overcome obstacles that would have defeated someone with less energy and determination. Her strong religious upbringing also was valuable because it instilled a code of ethics in her that helped her gain the trust of news sources and the respect of her colleagues.

Coping with Rejection and Becoming a Survivor

There is little doubt that the rejection Underwood experienced during her formative years left her psychologically scarred. But on a subconscious level, at least, she must have reealized that no matter how much life had disappointed her, she had survived. Perhaps it was the realization that she was a survivor that gave her the courage to go into new situations unprepared. The editorship was her last new frontier, but many years earlier, at age 15, she had exhibited a pioneer spirit when she left the security of her foster family to face an unknown future in California. At her age, traveling unaccompanied across the country was not common, especially for a young woman. Yet she turned whatever fears she had of the future into optimism and got on the train--alone.

Although the years she spent in California prior to

her marriage were rough and many of her old emotional wounds were re-opened, it was an important period of growth for her. During this time she developed many of the survival skills that helped her become a successful newspaperwoman--resourcefulness, a knowledge of human nature and the ability to carry on in difficult circumstances.

As a reporter Underwood was known for her ingenuity, a trait that most likely stemmed from her adolescence. When she was 15, unlike most young women her age, she had to support herself. With no parents to turn to for advice, she had to depend on her own wits to survive.

As a reporter she also seemed to have an uncanny ability to get at the truth, occasionally solving crimes before the police did. Again, her teen-age years in California provide insight. During that period, she learned through bitter experience not to believe everything she was told. After being disillusioned too many times by people she trusted, she developed a skepticism that carried over into adulthood and benefited her as a newspaperwoman.

Perhaps the most important lesson she learned from struggling to survive on her own was the value of perseverance. During her early years at the Record, when she was aspiring to become a hard news reporter, she was able to get past many obstacles and setbacks by turning her frustration into determination, rather than letting disappointment and anger force her into giving up her

goals. Rarely throughout her career did she back down from a challenge because experience had taught her that with enough persistence and hard work she could accomplish the task.

Breaking into Cityside

Underwood broke into reporting primarily by covering club news under the guidance of her mentor, society editor Gertrude Price, but she knew by the end of her first year at the Record that she wanted to be a hard news reporter. On the surface, the decision to set her sights on cityside seems somewhat unusual. First, women were not particularly welcomed on cityside. Second, as she admitted in her autobiography, she was repelled at first by the boisterous atmosphere of the city room where the language was profane and the liquor flowed freely.

However, her initial repulsion to being in the city room was accompanied by a strong desire to work there. Given her strict upbringing, it's possible that her mixed response was caused by a conflict between the religious and moral principles she absorbed while living with her foster parents and a subconscious desire to finally have some of the fun she had missed as a child. It is equally possible that she simply knew instinctively the job suited her personality--or at least the personality she wanted to have.

Many of the Underwood's qualities discussed

previously in this chapter--perseverance, a disciplined approach to work, ingenuity and the willingness to go into new situations unprepared--were important factors contributing to her acceptance in the city room. But success did not happen overnight. It took years, and it might never have happened if Underwood had been less assertive about reaching her goal. She initiated the assignment that resulted in her first break--a front page exclusive--by locating the parents of a murder suspect whom nobody had thought to interview. She followed up the first exclusive with a second that she also initiated--an interview with the wife of one of the murder victims.

Her ambition and resourcefulness began to be noticed so that gradually she was given more assignments. But it was her attitude as much as her reporting ability that gained her the respect of her colleagues. She worked harder and longer than any of her peers, remained humble about her scoops, credited anyone who helped her and willingly took any story or did any job that was assigned to her, no matter how insignificant. By the time the Herald-Express hired her away from the Record she had established a reputation as a top reporter.

Research questions 2 through 7 and hypotheses 3 and 4 are addressed in the following sections.

Cityside Reporter

When she went to work for Hearst, her reputation from the Record had preceded her and she was accepted into the city room almost immediately. Although she still worked harder and longer than most of her colleagues, she finally began to reap the rewards from her efforts. During her years as a reporter for the Herald-Express she realized the goal she had set for herself at the Record. She covered many of the city's most sensational murder cases, trials and Hollywood scandals, becoming one of the most respected general assignment reporters in Los Angeles.

The recognition she received for her work boosted her confidence and did wonders for her self-image. She was able to push the memories of her childhood a little further back in her mind and to enjoy the present. Later in life when she reminisced about her career, she seemed to have a special emotional attachment to that period of time, telling anecdotes about the stories she covered and about the camaraderie in the newsroom.

By the time she began working at the Herald-Express, she had long since shed most of the remnants of her puritanical upbringing and her personality thrived in the party atmosphere of the city room. Her male colleagues considered her one of the boys. She drank with them, shared jokes with them and spoke their language.

A profile of Underwood written by managing editor Jack Campbell for the October 27, 1937 anniversary issue of

the Herald-Express, in which he described her as a "go-gettun reporter who should have been a man" validated both her reputation as a top reporter and the acceptance by her male colleagues as one of them. Although she was already well-known within the local journalism community, the profile projected Underwood's image as a tough crime reporter to the public for the first time.

The Editorship

When Underwood became city editor, her public image spread. Two national magazines did articles proclaiming her to be the first woman city editor of a major metropolitan daily. Both articles described her as a tough yet sentimental newspaperwoman out of the "Front Page" tradition of journalism. Both magazines emphasized her resourcefulness, her insistence on loyalty and honesty from her staff, and the rapport she had with her male colleagues.

The publicity gave Underwood, who was sensitive to the opinions of others, an added incentive to prove herself in a position in which most of her male colleagues had lasted only a few months. By developing a personal management style based on her journalism experience as a reporter and the organizational, clerical and production skills she had learned at the Record and the Guardian, the weekly she published during the early 1930s, she stepped up to the challenge. But it was her interpersonal skills that

ensured her success.

She knew how to get the most out of her staff by encouraging cohesiveness and camaraderie, thus motivating them to compete against other newspapers rather than against each other. She treated each person as an individual, giving empathy and support when he or she needed it. They, in turn, gave her devotion and hard work. With her drive, charisma and administrative ability, she lasted an unprecedented 17 years in the city editor job.

Research question five and hypothesis number six are addressed in the following section.

The Autobiography and the Image

Underwood's autobiography was largely written by her friend Foster Goss, but it is reasonable to assume she approved of the image he presented of her. Goss portrayed Underwood as an aggressive yet compassionate newspaperwoman, inveterate practical joker and charismatic editor who drove her staff as hard as she drove herself. The book emphasized her masculine approach to reporting by focusing on her adventures as a crime reporter, describing many of the cases she covered in grisly detail in order to underscore her physical and emotional stamina. The journalistic lingo and mild profanity used throughout the book furthered the image of Underwood as one of the boys.

To counterbalance and perhaps soften the image in order to appeal to the widest audience possible, the book

dealt extensively with Underwood's unhappy childhood and often referred to the time she spent meeting her domestic obligations.

The publication of Newspaperwoman and the publicity surrounding it reached a much larger audience than anything previously written about her. It brought her national recognition and became the basis for a number of future articles about her.

Contrary to what might be expected, Underwood's media image changed very little over the years, despite the changes that occurred in journalism and in society's perception of women in the workplace. Articles written after her retirement, including obituaries, relied primarily on the same anecdotes and reflected essentially the same image that was presented in Newspaperwoman.

Research question eight and hypothesis number five are addressed in the following section.

Women in Mangement

Although the opportunities for women in newspaper management are greater today than they were when Underwood became city editor, females still hold only a small fraction of the jobs. According to a 1986 survey by the American Society of Newspaper Editors only 12.4 percent of the country's newspaper editors are women.¹ And the majority of women still work in "life style" sections rather than cityside. "A survey of 648 daily newspapers by

Jean Gaddy Wilson of the Missouri School of Journalism showed that women account for 90 percent of the "life style" editors in America but only about 20% of city editors, in charge of local "hard" news.²

In view of the statistics, understanding the qualities that helped Underwood become a successful editor is not only historically important, but it is relevant to contemporary women who aspire to positions in newspaper management. According to a 1983 article which discusses the character traits most valued in female editors by Gannett News Service, the industry leader in terms of recruiting and hiring women into management,³ very little has changed since Underwood ran the city desk. "Gannett values traditional masculine traits, putting career first and family second Gannett's management style is consistently described by the women who work there as 'tough' or 'macho.'"⁴

Underwood's attitude toward her job was also similar to the attitudes prevalent among contemporary women in newspaper management. One researcher concluded:

They are aware of and willing to give almost total commitment to the job. They recognize certain "dues" must be paid for such time as for family, friends and individual recreation or development. However, they don't resent the price they have paid feeling the choices were theirs to make.⁵

Contemporary women journalists who aspire to management, particularly to top executive position,

probably will have to work harder and longer than their male counterparts. And they will probably need to adapt to the value system of the predominantly male city room if they are to be accepted.

Although today's newspaperwomen need to possess many of the same qualities Underwood had in order to survive, it's questionable whether Underwood herself would have adapted well to the newspaper business of the 1980s. In many ways she was a product of her time. Her lack of a high school education, which today would be a liability, was an asset during the 1930s and 1940s when journalists in Los Angeles looked suspiciously at anyone who was "too educated."⁶

Perhaps Jack Smith of the Los Angeles Times provided the best explanation as to why Underwood entered journalism at the right time and best fit the newspaper style of her time. When asked if she could have become successful in today's newspaper business, he responded:

She couldn't even get a job today [because of her lack of education]. And in a way that's regrettable because she had a lot of energy, a lot of drive and a lot of love for this business. And in a way, she was meant to serve the reader, at least to get the news to him as fast and as accurately as possible. She was after sensational news and that's what the reader wanted. And she made a great game out of it and it was constantly exciting to work for her.

A lot of that is missing today, with all their degrees and skills in English, international affairs and all that stuff--they still don't know what to do in the street.⁷

In retrospect, Underwood herself realized she had

entered the business at the right time. A few years before she died, she said of journalism,

"It's changed so much. I was in the right place at the right time. Sure the papers have more reporters today and more space. But I don't think they know how to be newspaper editors or reporters anymore. A lot of the fighting spirit is gone and fighting spirit is what made the old newspapers great. Someday somebody's going to go back to real old fashioned newspapering and think they've made a great discovery."⁸

Recommendations for Further Study

This thesis points to the need for a study devoted exclusively to the history of the Hearst newspapers in Los Angeles. Although sources such as Chaney and Cieply's The Heasts, and Gottlieb and Wolt's Thinking Big provide good information on the subject, they merely scrape the surface of an important area of Los Angeles journalism history.

At present, there is no systematic study of Los Angeles journalism history. A comprehensive examination of all of the newspapers in Los Angeles and their impact on each other and the city would be an important area of research.

Many other women besides Agness Underwood made important contributions to Los Angeles newspapers. The history of women journalists in Los Angeles deserves further study.

Underwood's promotion to city editor and later to managing editor suggests the need for a study analyzing Hearst's hiring and promotional practices regarding women.

Did newspaperwomen fare better with Hearst than with other publishers? If so, did their presence result in a more progressive treatment of women and a greater concern for women's issues in Hearst's newspapers?

Another suggestion for further research would be to examine the images of print journalists during the most competitive period of the newspaper business in Los Angeles when "Front Page" journalism was at its peak. Did most newspaper people try to live up to the image of journalists portrayed in movies during that time? If so, how did it influence their work?

CHAPTER IX NOTES

¹Thomas B. Rosensteil, "A Woman Lands the Top Newsroom Job at Major Daily," Los Angeles Times, 12 June 1987, Part IV, p. 1. Statistics includes middle and upper management.

²Ibid., p. 2.

³Louise Berkinow, "Gannett Women in Top Posts but Cultural Influence Yet to Come," Savvy, March, 1983.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ardyth B. Sohn, "Goals and Achievement Orientations of Women Newspaper Managers," Journalism Quarterly, Autumn 1984, p. 601.

⁶Interview with Gladwyn Hill, July 1, 1985.

⁷Interview with Jack Smith, March 7, 1985.

⁸Henstell, "Newspaperwoman Tells All About It," p. 7.

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Appendix

Highlights among honors, citations and awards Agness Underwood received during her career.¹

March 31, 1949. Woman of Achievement Award, American Legion, Los Angeles County Council and its Auxiliary.

July 27, 1949. National Headliner Award, for outstanding achievement in journalism, Theta Sigma Phi, at its national convention, Dallas, Texas.

April 15, 1950. A guest of honor, annual banquet, Women's National Press Club, Washington, D.C.

August 11, 1951. Honorary degree, Master of Business Administration, Woodbury College, Los Angeles.

February 16, 1952. Golden Flame Award (first to be presented), California Association of Press Woman.

January 12, 1956. Trophy, for "outstanding achievement", "Life Is What You Make It", Columbia Broadcasting System television program.

November 7, 1956. Subject of Ralph Edwards' nationwide television broadcast, "This Is Your Life".

(Other television or radio events have included those as interview subject on Johnny Carson, Father Keller's "Christopher" (multiple), "Voice of America" (multiple), "To Tell the Truth", "Night Beat" with Frank Lovejoy, and Bob Hope (radio) programs).

January 4, 1957. Citation, for "success in her chosen field of journalism", Los Angeles Commandery, Knights Templar.

May 9, 1957. Citation, American Legion, District 17, California.

May 16, 1957. Sister Pin Award, Delta Phi Epsilon foreign service fraternity.

June 12, 1957. Outstanding Achievement Award, Women's Graphic Arts Club, Los Angeles.

June 1957. Honorary Commander and Award, Port of Los Angeles, Board of Harbor Commissioners.

June 12, 1958. Los Angeles City Council scroll containing copy of resolution, passed unanimously, for

"outstanding service ... to ... journalism generally ... and ... her leadership ... in numerous projects ... for betterment of Los Angeles ..."

June 20, 1958. Honorary degree, Doctor of Laws, College of Osteopathic Physicians and Surgeons, Los Angeles, (now California College of Medicine, University of California).

January 17, 1959. One of 348 Los Angeles women listed in first edition of "Who's Who of American Women".

December 13, 1960. Silver cup award, as one of Los Angeles Times "women of the year". This was Times' first award for journalism.

March 26, 1961. President's annual award, B'nai B'rith Girls of Southern California. "... for inspiration to teenage girls".

July 28, 1961. "Newspaperwoman of the Year" guest of honor, Greater Los Angeles Press Club banquet.

June 28, 1962. Medallion Award as "The Most Outstanding Woman in Journalism", National Federation of Press Women, convention, Denver, Colorado.

July 7, 1962. Award of Merit, Military Order of the Purple Heart, Department of California.

July 10, 1962. Commendation Award, "...for distinguished leadership and omience in public life", Soroptimist Federation of the Americas, women of distinction banquet, biennial convention, San Francisco, California.

July 18, 1962. Mayor Samuel W. Yorty proclaimed "Aggie Underwood Day" in Los Angeles. Los Angeles City Council unanimously passed resolution designating "Aggie Underwood Day". The official documents were recorded in an illuminated, hand-lettered, leather-bound book presented to her.

January 18, 1963. New citation, American Legion, 17th District, California, for "...outstanding service to the community".

March 28, 1963. Humanitarianism Award, Los Angeles Cancer Prevention Society, for "...inspiring exemplification of dedicated service to the health and welfare of the community."

April 20, 1963. Citation, "...in honor of her many achievements" and hailing her as "this nation's most

outstanding newspaperwoman", Pacific Region, Soroptimist Federation of the Americas.

June 23, 1963. Golden Lulu Award, Los Angeles Advertising Women, at 60th annual convention, Advertising Association of the West, Los Angeles.

September 17, 1963. Citation as "Outstanding Woman of the Year" for 1963 in journalism, by Board of Editors, "Who's Who of American Women"--one of thirteen cited as outstanding among 20,500 distinguished women listed in the book.

December 8, 1963. "Woman of the Year" Humanitarian Award, B'nai B'rith, Hollywood Lodge, 11-11.

March 18, 1964. Merit Award, American Institute of Fine Arts.

May 26, 1964. Knightly Cross of St. Brigitte, Knightly Order of St. Brigitte, for "...outstanding service in the cause of Christian, patriotic, cultural and charitable endeavors".

June 21, 1964. Medal and Citation, International Institute of American Ideals GRUPA--USA, "...in recognition of your high personal merits ... and support of ... high ideals of the American way of life ..."

November 6, 1966. Printer's Devil Award, Theta Sigma Phi, Los Angeles chapter, for "...outstanding achievement in journalism"--first time the award presented to a woman.

March 20, 1967. Citation, U.S. Social Security Administration, for "...journalistic excellence" and community service.

October 26, 1967. Named honorary citizen of Montebello and officially presented key to city by Mayor Anthony Lambo, at first annual Montebello Art Festival. (First U.S. citizen so designated--honor theretofore confined to foreign dignitaries).

¹Source: Agness Underwood Collection.